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T THE MOORINGS

BY

ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY

AUTHOR OF 'NELLIE'S MEMORIES,' 'A PASSAGE PERILOUS,' ETC. ETC.

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CHAPTER I

A COAT AND ITS WEARER

Let any Cause-and-Effect Philosopher explain, not why I wear such and such a Garment, obey such and such a Law ; but even why *I am here*, to wear and obey anything!—*Sartor Resartus*.

‘WHY, Betty! my dear Betty!’

‘Now it is no good your trying to hush me, Kate, for I mean to have my say’—here there was an indignant thrill in the clear young voice. ‘Talk of Christians ; we are just civilised heathen. We don’t bow down to stocks and stones, but we worship rank and money and fine clothes and all sorts of detestable fetishes. I think we are all as mean and cowardly as possible to take no notice of those two poor things—strangers, too—just because the gentleman’s coat—as Mr. Fraser has so wittily remarked—has evidently seen the seamy side of life. Aren’t you ashamed to make fun of honest poverty?’ and Betty turned her glowing face to the embarrassed young man.

‘Oh, I say, Miss Woodford, you need not be quite so crushing. If Mrs. Colville chooses to neglect her guests, it is not our business, don’t you know, to remind her of her duties. I was always a modest, retiring sort of fellow—as the mater will tell you.’

Betty regarded him scornfully ; she was evidently very much in earnest.

‘ I daresay the Levite in the parable was a retiring, nervous sort of person—and probably he was young too—picking up wounded travellers wasn’t his line at all. Oh, you may laugh, Kate, it is a fine joke to you and Mr. Fraser ; but, all the same, I mean to speak to that poor lady. There, he has left her ’ ; and Betty started up so impulsively, that her foot caught in her companion’s lace flounce, and she would have fallen but for Mr. Fraser’s timely help. ‘ Dear me, how awkward I am ; but there is no damage done, Kate ’ ; and Betty blew her a kiss as she sped on her kindly errand.

The large drawing-room at the Grange was crowded with guests—and the music-room beyond was still more thronged ; the hubbub of voices was almost deafening until the tuning of violin and violoncello compelled them to reluctant silence. Mrs. Colville was giving one of her grandest *musicales* that night, and one or two famous artistes whom she numbered amongst her friends had volunteered their services ; so no wonder the *élite* of Cottingdean, including the bishop, the dean, and the Luxmores from the Castle, had willingly accepted Mrs. Colville’s invitation.

Perhaps it was rather an ‘omnium-gatherum,’ as one of the canons remarked, after taking an exhaustive survey of the reception-rooms. ‘ All Cottingdean and the adjacent villages seem represented,’ he continued in a confidential aside to the wife of the leading solicitor in the town. ‘ Now who can those people be ? ’ fixing his glass more firmly in his eye as he spoke. ‘ The man’s face seems familiar to me, and yet where can I have seen him ? And, good heavens,’ *sotto voce*, ‘ what a coat ! It must have come out of the ark ! ’

The pair who were attracting so much attention were neither young nor remarkable for good looks. From the moment of their entrance into the room, after a languid hand-shake from the resplendent hostess, they had placed themselves in a retired corner—an angle of the wall connecting the drawing-room and music-room—and they had remained there the whole evening, apparently absorbed in the music; the lady seated on a high-backed chair dating from the early Victorian period, and the gentleman standing beside her, drawn up rather stiffly like a sentinel on duty. None of the passers-by accosted them, and no attentive hostess approached their corner—to all appearances they might have been on a desert island as far as sociability was concerned—neither did they converse together. Now and then there was a swift upward glance on the lady's part, as though to assure herself that her companion was still beside her; then her eyes were lowered again and fixed on the breadth of turned silk in her lap, where the grease spot was still so painfully apparent. Herr Koch had just finished playing his delicious fugue, when the gentleman whispered a word into her ear, and the next minute his tall, thin form was traversing the music-room. It was then that Betty crossed the room impulsively.

‘Isn't Herr Koch delightful? he is all the fashion in London,’ she began impulsively. Then, as the lady started with evident surprise at being accosted, ‘Oh, I hope you do not mind my speaking to you in this unconventional manner; but you seemed so dull and shut in in this corner that——’ here Betty paused as though she were embarrassed.

‘You are very kind,’ in a pleasant, cultured voice; ‘but I am afraid I have no seat to offer you. My

brother has been standing for hours, and I should think his long legs must ache by this time. But we have not been dull ; the music has been so lovely that I am quite grateful to Mrs. Colville for asking us.'

'Do you know her well?' But here the lady smiled—she had a very charming smile—and shook her head.

'Oh no, not well—hardly at all, I should say. Mr. Lassiter—that is my brother—did a small service for one of her sons, and I suppose this is meant as a return.'

'And you live in Cottingdean?' Betty did not in the least mean to be inquisitive, but she always asked questions when she was nervous, and she was decidedly not at her ease just then. The 'poor thing,' as she had somewhat patronisingly called Miss Lassiter, was regarding her with large clear eyes, which looked at once amused and friendly ; and at that moment Betty's keen girlish glance detected the grease stains and the thin turned breadths of faded silk, and she noticed the lace trimmings were decidedly rusty.

Yes, she was poor—terribly poor—there could be no doubt of that, but she was a gentlewoman. Betty had recognised that at once—and she was rather nice too. Then she started as a hand touched her arm lightly.

'Do you think you might commandeer that stool behind the music-room door—no one is using it at present—and then we could talk more comfortably? My brother has discovered an acquaintance in that long-haired Hungarian who plays the violoncello, so he will not be back just yet ; and I have not heard the sound of my own voice for the last two hours and a half.'

Nothing could have charmed Betty more. As she

reappeared with the stool, she looked over her shoulder at two astonished faces that were watching her movements:

‘Betty is a regular little besom,’ observed Kate delightedly. ‘As I am Scotch, I glory in that word. Bless her little heart, she is as wilful and as sweet as a May breeze.’

‘Your May breeze had a touch of March sharpness in it,’ returned Mr. Fraser. ‘She was a bit too hard on a fellow, don’t you know. A man with a coat like that can’t expect many introductions. I made up my mind, Miss Allen, that he was a pianist out of employment; but no one has asked him to play, so perhaps he is only a piano-tuner’; for Archie Fraser was a trifle cross at Betty’s abrupt leave-taking.

Kate Allen laughed merrily. ‘Oh, if Betty could only hear you say that! But do look at them now; they are talking as happily as possible. Betty is nodding her head and chattering like a magpie, and her “poor thing” is actually smiling. Don’t you wish we were near enough to hear their conversation?’

At that moment Betty was saying—

‘It must be rather nice to live in Cottingdean; it is such a dear old place—the cathedral and the close and the castle are all so charming. I stay here for weeks at a time with my friends the Allens. They are such nice people. Kate—that young lady in the blue dress opposite—is my special crony—we were at school together—but I like them all—mother, father, brothers, and sisters. They live in that old red brick house in the market-place. But perhaps you know them?’

‘We know no one in Cottingdean,’ returned Miss Lassiter quietly. ‘We live in quite a small house in Brook Street; and as we cannot afford to be hospitable

to our neighbours, we think it wiser not to make friends.'

'And yet you are here to-night——' It was one of Betty's reckless little speeches, but she repented her words almost before they had left her lips; she blushed so furiously over her own impertinence that even her soft little throat was tinged with colour.

'Oh, that was my brother's whim,' replied Miss Lassiter quietly. 'He wanted to hear Koch play—he is passionately fond of music—so I could hardly refuse to accompany him, although——' she checked herself and smoothed her dress a little nervously. 'One must sacrifice one's own feelings sometimes to give pleasure to other people,' she continued rather hurriedly.

'That is what Martha says so often,' returned Betty. 'Somehow, you remind me of Martha. She is my only sister, and she is eight years older, and she is so good and sensible, and always thinks of herself last. So many of us have died, our "green gardens" fill fast,' and there was something wistful in Betty's tones; 'now there are only three of us—father and Martha and me'; and in spite of the faulty grammar, Miss Lassiter thought the child's speech very pathetic, and the vivid little brown face, that was quaint rather than pretty, somehow appealed to her.

'I like that idea "green gardens,"' observed Miss Lassiter thoughtfully; 'it seems to veil so prettily the bald, grim fact of death. I have had more than one argument with my brother on that very subject. I remember he once said that you might as well endeavour to plant flowers on a rock as to disguise the one stupendous reality "by mere meretricious word-embroidery."'

Betty opened her eyes rather widely at this speech.

She even drew in her breath, as though she feared she were out of her depth. This was not the sort of conversation she had been accustomed to hear at Mrs. Colville's *musicales* ; and yet it was rather nice too—Betty's favourite word.

'Your brother must be a pessimist,' she said, after a moment's silence.

'Perhaps you are right ; but his pessimism harms no one but himself. And, after all, Miss Woodford'—for Betty had introduced herself somewhat hesitatingly—'men look at things from such a different standpoint. "Word-embroidery," as he calls it, is dear to the feminine mind.'

'Yes, I suppose so ; but all the same I like things to be true,' returned the girl, with a queer little frown that made her look like an old woman. 'I never cared for pretty conceits that had no real meaning. It was dear Martha who always talked about "the green gardens" when we were children ; and when Rosie and Drummond and Willie died, we used to go every week to plant flowers and tidy our gardens. When I was a tiny mite I used to say they were buried flowers, which would sprout into angels one day, and I really believed it.'

A sweet expression crossed Miss Lassiter's face, but she kept her thoughts to herself, for at that moment the music recommenced and the babel of voices was suddenly hushed. Betty sat on her stool with her hands folded demurely in her lap and her head slightly drooping. At such moments of passivity Betty was not pretty—'just an ordinary little brown girl with big eyes,' as some one described her. Life, movement, animation, and constant changes of expression were Betty's only claim to beauty. Nevertheless,

the masculine youth of Cottingdean had pronounced the verdict that little Betty Woodford was decidedly fetching; and Archie Fraser once told his sister privately 'that he liked the way Betty did her hair, it was so nice and crinkly.'

Betty did not understand music in the least unless it were tune, as she phrased it: to her it was a grand unknown language that needed translation. She listened with non-comprehending ears to the symphony that was flooding Sheila Lassiter's soul with quiet rapture. 'If I had only a musical ear,' thought Betty, with a sigh. Of course it was wonderful—Herr Koch played divinely, even she recognised that—and in a vague girlish way she felt that it made her long to be good. 'Martha is right,' she said to herself, 'we ought to live so that people are the better for our being born into the world. I remember she once said to me that she never felt quite happy at the end of a day if she could not recall doing a kind action for some one: "It might have been only picking a flower for a friend, or giving a mug of water to a thirsty tramp, or a bone to a stray dog; they are little things, Betty, but they count"; that was so like my dear old Marty.'

Betty was in a brown study now; she was back at the Old Cottage, and the scent of the yellow gorse seemed to pervade the atmosphere. She was not conscious that the music had stopped until the sound of applause, the hand-clapping and bravos, roused her, and then she saw Mr. Lassiter approaching them. He was regarding the intruder with surprise. 'Miss Woodford, may I introduce my brother?' and Mr. Lassiter bowed a little stiffly.

Betty regarded him with shy awe. Later on, when

they were better acquainted, Mr. Lassiter told her that, when he saw her on her little stool beside his sister, he thought of little Miss Muffet at once. 'And you looked at me, too, with alarmed eyes, as though I were the spider. I quite expected you to run away.'

Betty, who was small in size and not much over nineteen, had some good reason for her shyness. Mr. Lassiter was the tallest man she had ever seen; to a stranger his height was tremendous, and as he was very thin, the rough lads of Cottingdean had dubbed him 'the Lamp-post'—a not inapt comparison. He was not young—about thirty-three—and was evidently some years older than his sister; his face was thin and sallow, and he wore spectacles, but his forehead was broad and indicated intellect, and under the dark moustache there were firm, closely-shut lips and rather a pointed chin.

'Well, Edward, have you come to tell me that it is time to go? I am quite ready. That symphony was too lovely—I want to hear no more.'

'It is half-past eleven, and some of the people are beginning to move,' returned Mr. Lassiter. 'Oh, I forgot, Colville told me to get you an ice or something; he says I have neglected you all these hours. I am so sorry, my dear. Why did you not remind me?'

'I would rather wait till we get home,' replied his sister quietly; 'the refreshment-room is sure to be crowded—there was a regular exodus just now. You are wrong, Ned, people are not going; there is still the quartette, and if you wish, we will remain'; but Sheila's eyes looked a little weary.

'No, I am quite satisfied. But this young lady'—for he had already forgotten her name—'if she would like to go to the refreshment-room——' But Betty jumped

up quickly. 'Oh no, thank you. I have had two ices already, and my friend is beckoning to me, so I must wish you good-night,'—she held out her hand to Sheila as she spoke.

'Good-bye, Miss Woodford. You were very kind to take pity on my loneliness; perhaps, as the world is not so large as we think it, we may meet again.'

'Oh, I hope so'; and Betty evidently meant what she said. And then she shook hands with Mr. Lassiter, carefully averting her eyes from the coat as she did so. 'He must have had it for years and years,' she thought; 'he has quite outgrown it, and I am sure it must be an awfully tight fit.'

'So you have made friends with the piano-tuner,' observed Kate wickedly.

'The piano-tuner?' in a mystified voice. 'Are you talking of Mr. Lassiter? Surely you are not serious, Katie; Mrs. Colville would hardly have asked a piano-tuner to her *musicale*.'

'Oh, it is only Miss Allen's fun,' observed Mr. Fraser hastily, but he had grown rather red. 'Could we have another ice, Miss Woodford; the brown bread is awfully good?' And Betty, who had a penchant for ices, did not refuse this time.

'Rather a nice little thing, Sheila,' observed Mr. Lassiter, as they walked through the slumbering town in the twilight. 'Where did you pick her up?'

'It was she who picked me up,' returned his sister with an amused laugh. 'The child thought I looked dull in my corner, and actually left her party to come and cheer me up.'

'It was a decent thing to do, and very good-natured. I can't say our hostess overwhelmed us with attention.'

‘Did you expect she would, Ned? I never laid such flattering unction to my soul. I knew we should be left in severe isolation,—and who can wonder at it?’

‘You mean we were a bit shabby? Sheila, I must manage to get you a new dress, by hook or by crook. I don’t know much about such matters, but it struck me that it was not quite up to date—not exactly *chic*.’

Sheila squeezed his arm with another laugh, but there were tears in her eyes.

‘You silly boy—*chic*, my poor old rag-bag of a dress! But it has served me well; this is its fifteenth birthday, poor dear. But, Ned, there is one vow that I mean to register before we go to a *musicale* again, that you shall have a new coat—if I go without meat for six months to save money to buy it.’ But an impatient ‘pshaw’ answered her. When a man has been caught up to paradise for the last three hours and has heard celestial melodies, it is a little hard to be flung so suddenly to earth again.

Presently a low masculine growl broke the silence, just as they were passing under the shadow of the cathedral. ‘Have you forgotten Teufelsdröckh, Sheila? “If Clothes in these times so tailorise and demoralise us, have they no redeeming value; can they not be altered to serve better; must they be cast to dogs?”’

‘Certainly not,’ returned Sheila with decision; ‘even Teufelsdröckh could not recommend altering a coat outgrown by its owner. I dared not look at you, dear, it made me so miserable; and then to see people stare at you!’

‘You foolish woman,’—for there was a little choke in Sheila’s voice,—“Shall we tremble,” as the Professor

finely says, "before clothwebs and cobwebs, whether woven in Arkwright looms, or by the silent Arachnes that weave unrestingly in our Imagination?" Listen to his words of wisdom, Sheila. "Whatsoever sensibly exists, whatsoever represents Spirit to Spirit, is properly a Clothing, a suit of Raiment, put on for a season, and to be laid off. Thus in this one pregnant subject of Clothes, rightly understood, is included all that men have thought, dreamed, done, and been: the whole External Universe and what it holds is but Clothing; and the essence of all Science lies in the Philosophy of Clothes." Ponder these words seriously and your mind will recover its true balance.' But Miss Lassiter's response to this would hardly have satisfied the German Professor:

'Stuff and nonsense, Ned! *Sartor Resartus* may be a grand book, but I am a practical woman, and a new coat you shall have, if I starve for it'; and Sheila's voice was full of energy.

CHAPTER II

A PHILOSOPHER AT HOME

We learn not in school but in life.—SENECA.

Whoever evades the burden, misses the blessing. True living is never easy ; there never comes a day when a noble life can be lived without effort.—MARDEN.

BROOK STREET was a small, insignificant by-street at the lower end of the town. The *élite* of Cottingdean society were grouped round the cathedral close and the castle ; but there were a few handsome, substantial-looking houses built round a small green, and these were designated the Greenery. The largest of these belonged to the Colvilles. Mr. Colville was the principal banker, and one or two of his sons were in the business. Mrs. Colville had good blood in her veins, and was connected with the Luxmores, who were very big people indeed.

It had recently been reported in Cottingdean that a certain elderly member of the aristocracy, who had lately lost his wife, had been smitten by the charms of Blanche Luxmore, and that in all probability the young *débutante* was a prospective countess. What matter if the Earl of Muncaster were the same age as her father ; the Luxmores were a proud and ambitious family, and the girl herself was quite willing to sacrifice

her youth and beauty in return for the solid advantages of rank and influence.

It was not to be expected, then, that the inhabitants of the close or the Greenery had any dealings with Brook Street. One of the junior clerks at the Bank and a lawyer's clerk or two lived there, and also the national schoolmistress, and the widow of a dissenting minister who had been left with straitened means and a large family.

It was a quiet, retired little place, for the main traffic was down Market Street, and only a tradesman's cart now and then invaded the stillness. The houses were small and old-fashioned, and most of them in summer were smothered with Virginian creeper. The front door opened on the street, and a low, small-paned window on either side gave a somewhat insufficient light to the dusky little sitting-rooms.

One of the smallest of these houses belonged to the Lassiters, and the largest and most cheerful room had been allotted to Mr. Lassiter for his study ; his sister had retained the other as her sitting-room and the general dining-room. It was a somewhat dull apartment, and Sheila had to sit very close to the window to do her sewing ; and on fine sunny days she often betook herself to her own bedroom, where she could overlook the homely little garden, with its strip of lawn and wide flower-borders, where old-fashioned flowers bloomed year after year—hollyhocks and peonies and great yellow lilies and phlox and sweet-williams and dainty London pride. At the end was an ancient pear-tree that still bore fruit, and one or two gnarled, moss-covered apple-trees. It was a homely little place enough, but Sheila loved to work in it ; while Kaiser the big black retriever, stretched his lazy length on the

warm grass and watched her, only wagging his great tail at intervals when she spoke to him.

As Mr. Lassiter inserted his latchkey, there was a short hoarse bark of delighted recognition, and Kaiser rushed to meet them, almost knocking down his mistress in his unmannerly joy.

‘Down, Kaiser! What a great blundering fellow you are; one would think you were still a puppy’; and Sheila took hold of the long black paws that were on her shoulders and kissed his glossy head. At the same moment a somewhat singular-looking figure, in a frilled nightcap and a peculiarly *négligée* costume, whisked round the corner.

‘Euphemia!’ exclaimed Sheila, in quite a shocked voice; but there was no answer. It was still early in March, and the nights were extremely chilly, and the sight of a brisk little fire burning cheerily was very welcome. Mr. Lassiter rubbed his hands in evident enjoyment, and Sheila looked at the coffee-pot reposing on the hob, and then at the tempting-looking sandwiches on the little round table; to both brother and sister the shabby study was a nest of comfort seen in the warm glow of the firelight.

‘Euphemia — Eppie — oh, you bad, disobedient woman!’ continued Sheila; and then her quick ear heard a stealthy footfall on the stairs, and the next moment she had run the offender to earth.

‘Eppie, aren’t you ashamed of yourself, getting out of your warm bed and going about the house in your stocking feet, you at your age, and with a cold too!’ and Sheila regarded her embarrassed domestic with pretended sternness and much secret amusement.

Eppie was a tall, angular woman, with the high cheek-bones and red hair that spoke of a Celtic origin.

And indeed Euphemia had spent all her early youth in a humble cot on the hillside, where her father, Duncan Gordon, watched over his black-faced ewes. Like so many other Scotch lassies, she had come south, and had entered into service with Sheila's mother, more than thirty years ago, cleaving to the family in all their troubles and vicissitudes with the devotion of a Celt.

'To my thinking,' Eppie once said, in her painstaking English, to a congenial spirit, a warm-hearted Irish-woman, who lived near, 'service rightly understood is not unlike matrimony: it is for better or for worse—and it is oftener for worse.'

'Shure it is the truth you are spaking, Eppie,' returned Biddy, putting her apron to her eyes. 'Don't I mind when the old master died—the hivens be his bed!—and Miss Eileen, the darlint, came and said to me, with the tears running down her swate face—

"Oh, Biddy dear," says she, "and sad and sore of heart I am to say it, but we can't afford to keep you and Mary too, and mother is afraid——" but I knew better than to let her finish.

"Whist ye, my darlint," says I, "and if ye can't be aisy, be as aisy as you can. And it is Mary, who is six months younger, as his riverence will tell you—and it is Mary who must go, for all she is a good girl and does her work well." And I had my way, Eppie, and here I am, and Mary is the mother of a family, and her eldest boy is doing finely in Canada, they say.'

'You did your part, Biddy, and I shall hope to do mine,' returned Eppie; 'though there are days and hours, I confess, when I fairly pine to see the old sheiling by the hillside and to smell the peat smoke again. But what did I tell you, my woman? it is for better or for worse, and in sickness and in health; and the Almighty

only knows which, for our times are in His hands. And if our wage is low here, He will make it up when pay-day comes, with maybe a "well done, faithful servant," at the end of it'—for Eppie came of a godly stock.

Sheila might well be pardoned for her secret amusement; for at that moment Euphemia was oddly attired in a coarse short nightgown and a red petticoat, and a checked shawl over her shoulders, and the frills of her cap were broad and stiff; but in her mistress's eyes she was a 'glorified angel.'

'You have made your cold worse, I know you have,' she remonstrated affectionately. 'Did I not tell you, Eppie, to take your favourite treacle posset and go to bed early, and I would light the fire if my brother wanted to sit up?'

'Now, don't you fash yourself, Miss Sheila, for there is no harm done. I just drank my posset and then I crept down in my stocking-feet to see if the fire was burning—and it was just fine. And then I thought Mr. Edward was so wild about the music that he would forget all about the food, and the pair of you would be starving. So I cut some mutton sandwiches and made some coffee; and I was just putting the pot on the hob when Kaiser barked, and I thought the master would have seen me!' Then Sheila laughed and kissed the old woman's freckled cheek.

'Good-night, you dear old thing; I might have known you were not to be trusted. Now I come to think of it, I am as hungry as possible, so I will just go down and enjoy my supper.'

'Come along, Sheila; what an age you have been!' observed her brother a little impatiently, for he had grown suddenly conscious of a vacuum in the inner man. 'I have taken off my war-paint, and feel twice the

man in my old coat'; and Mr. Lassiter drew up his own and his sister's chair to the table, and stretched out his long legs to the fire with an air of intense enjoyment.

Sheila smiled brightly at him over her coffee-pot. 'Isn't this nice, Ned? This is better than eating Neapolitan ices in a crowd. Besides, I am as hungry as a hunter, and Eppie's coffee is always so delicious. Is there a sandwich to spare for Kaiser, or shall I go and hunt for a bone?' But Mr. Lassiter declared himself in favour of the sandwich.

'It was not such a bad evening after all, was it, Sheila?' he observed presently, as he sat smoking his beloved meerschaum with his feet on the fender. They had been discussing the music, the artistes, and the company in the most animated manner, and Sheila and he had proved themselves keen observers of human nature. Both brother and sister had the same quiet sense of humour, though perhaps Sheila's gray eyes noticed a hundred things that escaped Edward Lassiter's.

'Do you know what I was thinking more than once this evening, Sheila?' he said, after a short silence, only broken by Kaiser's sonorous snores; 'I was wondering if we were not making a mistake in avoiding society so completely. We are becoming perfect hermits. Why should we deprive ourselves of a little rational enjoyment when it comes our way? After all, it was rather decent of Mrs. Colville to ask us to such a big affair.'

'The music was certainly a treat,' returned his sister; but she spoke rather hesitatingly, and there was a slight shade on her face. 'I was wrong to dread it so long beforehand, for it really was not such a terrible

ordeal. You found me such a nice little corner and no one molested us—there was just the music and you.'

Mr. Lassiter gave a low laugh. Sheila's frank admission tickled him vastly. She was congratulating herself on being left severely alone; their isolated position, and the utter neglect of their hostess, were evidently matters for satisfaction in her eyes.

'When you have your new dress you will not be so content to take a back seat,' he remarked shrewdly. Doubtless he had hit the mark, for his sister coloured and shook her head at him.

'It was the coat I minded,' she returned; for her woman's pride would not allow her to admit that his words had grazed the truth. 'But, Ned, seriously, if you would only consent to go out without me, there is no reason why you should not sometimes spend a pleasant evening listening to Chopin or your dearly beloved Beethoven. You know George Colville has taken a fancy to you, and is only too willing to be friendly.' But Mr. Lassiter puffed slowly at his pipe and remained silent, and Sheila knew at once that he did not approve of her speech.

'You see, dear,' she continued gently, 'I have grown so used to our quiet ways, that it is rather an effort to get out of my usual groove; one cannot always find a comfortable corner to hide one's shabbiness. And, Ned, I could not lay out the money happily on a new gown until——' and here she faltered and looked at him rather wistfully.

'My dear, there is no need to say all this; of course I understand what you mean. I only thought that a little wholesome relaxation might help us to work better; but I see the difficulty.'

‘There would be no difficulty, or very little, if you would leave me at home.’ Imploringly—‘If you only would, Ned, think how I should enjoy sitting up for you and hearing all you had to tell me ; it would be new life to us both.’

‘Nothing would induce me to leave you at home, Sheila. There, there’—a little irritably—‘say no more about it. I was a fool to hint at such a thing, but I suppose the music got into my head. We will go on in the old way, and put our shoulders bravely to the wheel. The road may be rough for a milestone or two, but, please God, my dear, it will be smoother by and by.’

‘I hope so—I hope so with all my heart.’ Sheila’s face was very sad as she spoke. But the next moment Mr. Lassiter laid down his pipe with a sudden exclamation.

‘What a duffer I am ! That letter !—and I never even read it. Now what in the world have I done with the confounded thing?’ and he began searching his pockets.

‘Do you mean the letter that I brought to your room, Ned?’

‘Yes. I was shaving, and your knock at the door startled me so that I nearly cut myself. Let me see ; I took it in, but I was in such a hurry that I forgot to read it.’

‘Then it will be there still—let me go and look for it.’ But Mr. Lassiter would not hear of this, and went off muttering anathemas on his own carelessness.

Sheila was too much accustomed to her brother’s absence of mind to express surprise, but at any other time she would have indulged in a playful jeer at his expense ; now, however, she only walked to the fire-

place and stood there looking down at the blaze with a thoughtful expression.

‘He is getting tired of the life—and no wonder,’ she said to herself. ‘It must be deadly dull for a man of his intellect never to mix with his equals. And all these years he has been so patient. A woman can inure herself to monotony far more easily. Besides, Ned absorbs all my thoughts ; when one has an object for one’s tenderness, one can manage to exist—though perhaps it is not much of a life for either of us.’

‘Well, Ned,’ breaking off her musings rather abruptly, ‘have you found the letter?’

‘Yes ; and the handwriting is strange to me. Ah,’ glancing at the signature, ‘I see it is from Roffey and Williams ; they are Aunt Sarah’s lawyers. Now what can they want with me? Dear me, Sheila,’ as his eyes scanned the page, ‘Aunt Sarah is dead, and we never even knew she was ill.’

‘Dead!’ echoed Sheila, in a voice of intense surprise, though it hardly expressed grief ; ‘poor old thing. But she must be very old, nearly ninety, I should think.’

‘I suppose so, though I do not know her age. I wonder why Roffey and Williams wish to see me. Perhaps, as I am next of kin, they want to consult me about the funeral.’

‘It seems a little strange——’ and then Sheila broke off with a questioning and somewhat eager look. But her brother shook his head.

‘Don’t build castles in the air, my dear. Our great-aunt chose to ignore us all her life, and it is not likely that she would remember us on her death-bed. Besides, they tell me she died quite suddenly, without any illness. You know as well as I do, Sheila, that she quarrelled with our father, and never could be induced to make

friends with him ; and she never took any notice of us after his death.'

'No ; but all the same we are her kith and kin. Still, you are right, Ned ; and there is small chance that she will leave us anything.'

'No, indeed ; in all probability her money will go to hospitals and refuges. I believe she was rather a philanthropic old person. But what a boon a few hundreds would be to us.'

'Yes, indeed' ; and Sheila's sigh came from the depth of her heart. 'Well, it is no good thinking—"that way madness lies." But it is rather sad that one should hear of an aunt's death without any feeling of regret or sorrow.'

'My dear girl, she was a stranger to us. I don't believe I saw her more than twice in my life, and I have only a hazy recollection of her.'

'Oh, but mother and I once stayed with her at Herne Bay, after I had the measles, so I can remember her better. Of course, I was very young, and to my childish eyes she was not particularly attractive—a sharp-faced little woman in black, with rather a severe voice and manner. Even mother seemed in awe of her. I have a notion that she always snubbed and repressed children. "Little girls should be seen, not heard," I remember so well her saying that ; and yet she was kind to me in her way. She used to put gingerbread snaps under my pillow ; I found them there when I woke. And I always had the biggest lump of sugar in my bread and milk, because she said I needed fattening. So I daresay her bark was worse than her bite.'

'She could not have been an amiable person, though, to keep up a feud all those years,' returned Mr.

Lassiter. 'I remember our father once remarked that she was a splendid hater, and that Uncle Hartree must have been somewhat henpecked. He spoke so bitterly once, Sheila, that I feel sure that the life-long breach between them troubled him excessively. She had brought him up, you know, and always meant to leave her money to him, until he offended her, and then she refused to see him.'

'But mother went to her sometimes. There was that Herne Bay visit, for example.'

'Yes, I know, Sheila ; but soon after that all intercourse ceased, and even our mother's letters were unanswered. Of course it was a grievous pity ; but, after all, Aunt Sarah punished herself most—she must have been very lonely.'

'Was she very rich, Ned ?'

'I should not think so ; fairly comfortable, I should say. But I am quite in the dark on this subject. Do you know, my dear girl, it is half-past one, and Kaiser is snoring loudly to remind me that it is time that he and I should go to our respective beds. And I have to take the early train to London, too, as Messrs. Roffey and Williams are urgent in their summons.'

'And you will not be back until the evening ?'

'No ; I shall catch the 6.15 train, so you may look for me about half-past eight. I shall want an early breakfast, I am afraid, but I beg that you will not disturb yourself.' But Sheila, who was lighting her candle, turned a deaf ear to this remark, and only wished him good-night.

CHAPTER III

‘WHAT AM I TO SAY, FATHER?’

We are beaten back in many a fray,
But newer strength we borrow ;
And where the vanguard camps to-day,
The rear shall rest to-morrow.

GERALD MASSEY.

SHEILA LASSITER was one of those women who are content to efface themselves for the sake of those dear to them. She was absolutely sane and reasonable, and there was nothing hysterical or emotional in her temperament; her impulses were under her control, but without losing her individuality, she was naturally unselfish and self-sacrificing. As she seldom indulged in introspection, she was quite unconscious that in her simple, womanly way she was at times almost heroic, and it would have surprised her greatly if any one had told her that now and then she did a fine thing; for, though she never said so, she had rather a poor opinion of herself. There was something childlike in her nature, too; little things pleased her, and she enjoyed them with a freshness that was surprising at her age. Thirty years of life had not destroyed her illusions or robbed her of hopefulness, though she never remembered the time when she had been free from care. Of course she had her sad moments, when the limitations of their circum-

stances pressed heavily upon her, when she would say to herself that it was not much of a life after all ; but in reality she was thinking not of herself but of her brother.

For him she had been ambitious and had dreamed dreams and seen visions, and it was the failure of these hopes that still caused her acute pain ; if she could have had her way, she would have smoothed his path and cleared away all the thorns and briars. She never dared trust herself long with such thoughts, for at these moments something rebellious seemed to stir within her.

Why had the heaviest burdens been always laid on his shoulders? Why should the strong man have to bear the mistakes and penalties of the weak, and the innocent have to suffer? Could it be right and just? Surely this was one of the saddest mysteries of life !

From her earliest years Sheila had been her mother's confidante ; she knew that the dearly loved husband and father was a source of trouble to them all. They were a small household, just the parents and Sheila and Edward and a younger brother—at once her torment and delight—who was now a wanderer over God's fair earth, and of whom they had not heard for years ; a fair-haired, brilliant youth, almost as irresponsible as his father. Julian Lassiter had possessed every good gift but one. He had health, intellect, an attractive personality, and a wonderful capacity for making friends ; but his will-power was weak and his moral sense imperfectly developed ; and though by no means vicious or bad, his self-indulgence and love of pleasure brought his family to the brink of ruin.

He had lost his parents when young, and his maternal aunt, Mrs. Hartree, had adopted him. She was childless and had just lost her husband, and the

lonely woman soon grew to love the bright-faced boy as though he were her own child. Nothing was denied him ; he had every advantage that could be given him. He was sent to Eton and then to Oxford ; and it was during his brief stay at that university that Julian got into lamentable mischief ; and after a series of quarrels and reconciliations and promises of amendment that were never fulfilled, he finally left his aunt's house, practically a beggar.

Mrs. Hartree was not a patient woman and her will was like iron ; all her milk of human kindness seemed to have turned to gall. In vain the vicar remonstrated with her on her severity. ' Julian is young, a mere lad,' he said to her ; ' with all his faults, he has a good heart' ; for the old man yearned after the prodigal. But she was obdurate.

' His conduct has been disgraceful, disgraceful,' she returned ; ' nothing can condone it. He has squandered my money, and in a few more months he would have ruined me. I have nourished a viper in my bosom, and I shall carry the sting all the days of my life. Let him go and work—it will be far better for him and me too—and let him take his false face out of my sight' ; but Mrs. Hartree looked an old woman as she spoke.

So Julian shook off the dust of the homely village where he had lived so long, and went out into the wide world. For a time he was ashamed and humiliated, and told himself that he had been a fool ; but a helping hand was soon held out to him—a wealthy friend who knew something of his circumstances, and believed Julian's version of facts, took him into his house as tutor to his boys. For a few months all went apparently well. No one in the household suspected that the fascinating

young tutor was making secret love to the only daughter. Hilda Beverley was rather a plain girl, but she was clever and amiable, and her father doted on her. She had inherited a small fortune from an aunt, and some of her mother's money would come to her. Julian knew he was doing well for himself. He was not in love with the girl, though her partiality for himself pleased and flattered his self-love. They were married secretly, and Hilda left the home that had sheltered her happy girlhood, in utter ignorance of her young husband's nature, and thinking him absolute perfection. For some years things went tolerably smoothly. Julian took up painting as his profession, and worked fitfully when the mood was on him. He had undoubted talent and plenty of imagination, but his lack of perseverance was fatal to all lasting success.

Julian was quite content to live on his wife's money and paint an occasional pot-boiler. He liked to talk art jargon and to fit up his studio with reckless extravagance. It was during this period, while the children were young, that Mrs. Hartree showed signs of softening to her erring nephew. She had met his wife at the house of a mutual friend, and Hilda had behaved very prettily to her husband's relative. It was after this that the invitation was given—that she and Sheila had joined her at Herne Bay. If only Julian had been wise and taken this opportunity to present himself uninvited, all might have been well. Hilda wrote to him more than once entreating him to come, but he was a moral coward, so he turned a deaf ear, and by and by Mrs. Hartree, hurt and disappointed, made no more overtures. Hilda's money was going fast, and soon the little household found themselves seriously straitened. Again and again Mr. Beverley helped them out of their

difficulties. It was he who sent Edward to Winchester and helped him to go to Oxford ; and if his grandfather had lived, the young man's future would have been assured. But a sudden illness carried him off before Edward had completed his third term. Mr. Beverley had been very liberal to his daughter during his lifetime, but, intentionally or not, there was no provision made for her after his death.

Edward was recalled home hastily. His father was ill. The doctor had warned them of danger. There was no money for anything, and the bailiffs were in the house. Julian had not only run through his wife's money, but there were heavy debts, and to make matters worse, Ivor was becoming a daily care.

'Don't be too hard on the lad, Ned,' groaned the sick man, as his son stood beside him dumb and nearly stupefied by the weight of all this misery. 'The boy takes after me. We are a poor lot, he and I. I know I have played the fool, but I swear to you, boy, I don't know how the money has gone. It is my luck. I never could keep a coin in my purse if I had it to spend—Aunt Sarah used to say that. Confound it, Ned, why don't you speak?'

'What am I to say, father?' returned the poor young fellow sadly. 'I must do the best I can for mother and Sheila—and God help us all!' The last words seemed almost wrung from him. Words, what were words! Ned was too crushed, too heart-sick for speech. His career was spoilt ; his grandfather was dead, and his uncles would refuse to do anything for them. There could be no more terms at Oxford ; he would have to work and turn his hand to anything. There were his father's debts and Ivor's schooling, and if his father died he would have to support his mother and Sheila.

'Good God, how is one to bear it?' he muttered as he turned away his face.

Ned realised at that moment the utter recklessness and folly that had spoilt all their lives. His father had wasted his substance and broken his wife and children's hearts, and yet there was no word of reproach from one of them. 'What am I to say, father?' that was all Ned had faltered. With all Julian's sins, never had a father been so tenderly loved. As Ned averted his glance from the sunken eyes and wasted face, a passionate pity overcame his just resentment.

'He is right, they cannot help themselves,' he muttered; 'there is something wanting in their natures. But there is nothing that one can do—one must just bear it.' But Ned's hand was clenched with sudden anguish as he went out of the room.

Ned and Sheila never knew how they lived through that awful time. They rarely ever spoke of it afterwards. 'It was like trying to swim across a half-frozen lake under a black midnight sky,' Ned said once; 'every moment one feared that one would be dragged under—and there were no stars.' 'I think if we had known beforehand we should have lost our senses,' returned Sheila; 'but we just lived a day at a time, and every hour had its own pain. Ned, it will not bear thinking about—it was too cruel, and it killed mother.' And then Sheila came behind her brother and put down her face on his shoulder, while a tear or two wetted the rough tweed. Then she patted it gently. 'You were so brave, my dear—so strong and brave; and then we were helped.'

It was during those sad, hopeless days that those young creatures tested each other's strength and endurance—that they drew together for comfort.

Death did not come to Julian Lassiter as a merciful angel ; with all his feeble force he clung to life. ' I am too young,' he would say piteously ; ' at forty-eight a man is only in his prime. I must have better advice. If only this pain were relieved I should soon get better. Why don't your brothers help us, Hilda ? But Martin was always a mean hound and owes me a grudge, and James takes after him.'

It was too true that the Beverley brothers had no love for Julian, and that for years they had refused to have any dealings with him. But they could hardly allow their only sister to starve. The bailiffs were ejected, and a few of the most pressing debts were paid, and a little ready-money provided for the needs of the distressed household. After Julian's death a small allowance was grudgingly paid to Hilda by her brothers, but it ceased with her life.

Julian's thought turned often to his youngest boy, and now and then he would say a wistful word ; or, ' Don't be too strict with him, Ned,' he would sigh ; ' the poor little chap takes after me—we were both born under an unlucky star. You were cut after a different pattern, lad—it was always easy for you to be straight.'

' I don't know about that, father.'

' Well, well, I can't argue about it'—tossing restlessly on his pillow. ' But somehow I seem to see things clearer since I have lain here. Your mother gave up a lot for me ; but I have spoiled her life—and my own too. Last night those words were haunting me ; they seemed written up in the wall in flaming fire—"unstable as water, thou shalt not excel." ' And then he groaned and turned over on his side.

After his father's death no kind benefactor held out a helping hand to Ned. Heaven only knows what fond

hopes and visions of brilliant successes were crushed and trampled underfoot ; outwardly at least Ned never rebelled.

'What was the use of saying anything?' he once exclaimed angrily, when Sheila was bemoaning his hard fate. 'I was like a toad under a harrow—I had to grin and bear it.' But Ned's face looked drawn and pale as he spoke. He had suddenly grown years older.

After a time he found a teaching engagement ; and as his evening hours were unemployed, he made his first unfledged attempts to earn a little by literature. At first his endeavours were not rewarded by success, but he persevered doggedly, and by and by an article was accepted by a leading magazine and handsomely rewarded, and after this he got on.

Hilda did not long survive her husband, and soon after the funeral the young people moved to Cottingdean. Ned taught all day in the grammar school ; but his evenings, and sometimes part of the night, were spent in literary work. Sheila, too, had a morning engagement. But for Ivor the little household would have been a peaceful one.

Ned had once promised his mother that, if it were ever in his power, his father's debts should be paid. It seemed a shameful thing to both mother and son that honest, hard-worked tradesmen should be defrauded of their due.

'Julian never seemed to care what things cost,' the widow would say to herself ; 'he was like a child—he must have all he fancied—but he never thought of the day of reckoning. Oh, my darling, if you had only understood, how happy we should have been !' And Hilda wept heart-broken tears ; for with all his moral deficiencies, she had loved him well.

Ned tried to keep his promise, but it was sad uphill work. It was as though with his own hands he had tied a millstone round his neck and was trying to breast the rough waves ; but Sheila encouraged and aided him.

They denied themselves pleasures, and every penny that could be spared was laid aside for this sacred purpose. Ivor's pleasure-loving temperament revolted against the Spartan simplicity that prevailed in the little household. He would argue the matter almost passionately with Sheila.

'It is all rot,' he would say. 'What is the good of you and Ned pinching and grinding in this ridiculous fashion ? You will be an old woman before your time, Sheila. As for Ned, he might be fifty already. What is it to us if poor old dad did not pay his debts ? No one can call us to account. I hate such Quixotic nonsense.'

'We are only honest,' returned Sheila with spirit. It always roused her if any one found fault with Ned. 'Why don't you try to help, Ivor, instead of always pulling us back ? We have anxieties enough without your adding to them' ; but she might as well have spoken to the wind.

Alas, Ivor resembled his father too closely. He was as irresponsible and reckless and lovable as Julian had been. As he had played truant at school, so he played truant with life. One wild March morning, when the little household in Brook Street opened their eyes on a new day, Euphemia brought a note to Sheila's bedside, with a very long face indeed. 'Read it, Miss Sheila,' she said anxiously, 'and maybe we shall find out why the dear lad's bed has never been slept in last night' ; for Eppie, like all womankind, adored the scapegrace.

Sheila put down her note ; her eyes looked wide and frightened. 'He has gone !' she exclaimed—'gone into the wide, wide world—to seek his fortune—oh, my poor misguided boy ! Let me get up, Eppie ; I must go to my brother—he will know what to do.'

'Do you mean—but I am no wanting to frichten you, my dawtie'—in moments of strong agitation Eppie always went back to her childish tongue. 'And the poor truant laddie will get his paiks. We are born to tribble, my wumman ; but it will be a cauld hame without our bonnie bairn. Aye, but it is no lichtsome'; and Eppie threw her apron over her face. Dear as Ned and Sheila were to her, it was her youngest nursling who came nearest to Eppie's heart.

'Maybe there is some mistake,' she muttered to herself, 'and we will have the laddie back soon.' But Eppie was wrong ; months passed, and then years, but no tidings of the wanderer came to the faithful hearts that watched for him.

CHAPTER IV

GREAT-AUNT SARAH

A little bit of patience often makes the sunshine come,
And a little bit of love makes a very happy home ;
A little bit of hope makes a rainy day look gay,
And a little bit of charity makes glad a weary way.
JESSIE GORDON.

THE morning after Mrs. Colville's *musicale* Sheila stood at the front door of the little house in Brook Street watching her brother's tall figure until it receded from sight. It was a gray, sunless day, and there was a nippy feeling in the east wind that was whirling little eddies of dust to her feet. She was wondering why she felt so restless and unsettled, and how she was to get through her long, lonely day. 'I suppose it is the effects of my unusual dissipation,' she said to herself. 'And then we sat up so late talking ; I don't believe I had more than three hours' sleep—I was so strangely wakeful. Now, as it is too early for lessons, I will go into town and get those things Eppie is wanting. A little walk will do me good.' And as Sheila put on her hat she planned how she would spend her day. She would do her Latin translation for Edward to correct, and perhaps a little algebra ; for Sheila was bent upon improving herself in these two branches of knowledge.

One of her pupils was a boy who was too delicate to go to school and who did his lessons with his sisters. He was a clever child, and Sheila knew she must work hard to keep ahead of him.

Sheila was very much attached to her pupils, and teaching was no drudgery to her ; but that morning she found it rather difficult to concentrate her attention on her task, and once she caught herself humming the bar of a fugue she had heard the previous evening. The next moment she met the reproachful stare of three pairs of round astonished eyes.

‘Oughtn’t you to give yourself a bad mark, Miss Latheter dear?’ lisped little Irene ; but her elder sister looked shocked at this. ‘Dot doesn’t mean to be rude, Miss Lassiter ; she is such a very little small girl, and she has not got manners yet’—here Dot grew red and ashamed. ‘When she is as big as me,’ continued Flo, with a self-satisfied and righteous air, ‘she will know that grown-ups and teachers may hum over lessons as much as they like.’

‘May they, Flo? I am not so sure of that. Now, supposing you play your scales and Dot finishes her sum’ ; and then the little busy bees set to work again. Some one had left a newspaper on the schoolroom table, and during a pause in the lessons Sheila took it up and glanced at the list of Births, Marriages, and Deaths, without perceiving at first that the date was in the previous week.

It was therefore with some surprise that she read the following entry : ‘On the 10th inst., at The Moorings, Uplands, Sarah Pennell, the Relict of the late Benjamin Hartree.’

‘The 10th inst., why, it is the 20th now,’ she said to herself, ‘so Aunt Sarah died quite ten days ago,

and the funeral must already have taken place—how very extraordinary'; and Sheila was clearly puzzled.

If the funeral were over, what could they want with Edward? Surely there must be some carelessness or oversight. They were her next of kin, and, as her grand-nephew, Edward would have attended the funeral as a matter of course—why had the poor lonely woman been taken to her grave without a single kinsman to follow her? Sheila was so absorbed in these thoughts, as she walked rapidly towards Brook Street, that she never even noticed a bright-eyed little girl nodding and smiling across the road, and she was very much startled a moment later when some one touched her.

'You did not see me, so I thought I would just run across and speak to you,' observed Betty rather breathlessly. 'I hope you do not mind, as I am leaving Cottingdean to-morrow.'

'And you are sorry for that?' returned Sheila, for there was something regretful in Betty's voice.

'Oh, one is never sorry to go home,' returned the girl, rather shocked at this; 'though, of course, it is always a pity when a pleasant visit comes to an end. The Allens are such dear people; but dad and Martha say they can't do without me any longer, and Miss Mowcher is fretting herself and losing her appetite—— Oh, I forgot,' interrupting herself with a laugh, as Sheila looked politely perplexed at this; 'how are you to know that Miss Mowcher is my dog—the dearest wee doggie you ever saw, just like a little gray door-mat, with bright beady eyes and jet-black nose. You should see her begging for sponge-cake and sugar; Miss Mowcher knows no end of parlour tricks.'

'What made you give her such a name, Miss Woodford?' for Betty was tripping beside her in the

friendliest way, though the Allen's house was in the opposite direction.

'Oh, I was reading *David Copperfield* just then, and she was such a volatile little ball of a puppy—here, there, and everywhere—and I thought the name would suit her down to the ground. Dad told me I was a goose and Martha called me a ridiculous child, but I had my way. It is only our old Jane who won't give in. Oh, she is such a funny old dear! She says it is little short of a sin to christen a dumb beast after any dead and gone woman, and that nothing would induce her to use the name, and that she should only call her Missy.'

'I prefer Missy myself,' returned Sheila, smiling. 'My brother has a fine collie, and we have named him Kaiser. Oh, here we are at Brook Street, and I have taken you so much out of the way.'

'Oh, I shall soon run back'; and Betty glanced curiously at the little old-fashioned houses. 'What a quiet little backwater of a street this seems!'

'Yes, we have no traffic to disturb us,' replied Sheila, holding out her hand. It never even occurred to her to ask Betty to come in, and the girl felt vaguely disappointed. Betty had taken a liking to her new acquaintance. Sheila's soft gray eyes full of kindness, and her pleasant voice and smile, had attracted her.

'I suppose it is being poor makes her so stiff,' she thought as she retraced her steps; 'but, in spite of her shabby clothes, she looked rather nice. Kate told me last night that she teaches the Goulburn children and that they are quite devoted to her.'

Sheila felt a grain of remorse as she let herself in; it would have done no harm to have asked the child in for a moment, just to see Kaiser. 'Ned is right, we are becoming hermit-crabs,' she said to herself. 'I

am not sure, after all, if we are wise to keep to ourselves so entirely'; and more than once that afternoon Sheila remembered the winsome little brown face—that was not pretty and yet had a quaint attractiveness—with a feeling of regret at her own standoffishness.

Sheila had set herself a long task of mending for the afternoon, and before tea she would take Kaiser for a run; the days were lengthening, and they could well do a couple of miles on the London road and be back before it was dark. The rest of the evening should be devoted to her studies; she would get at least two quiet hours before Edward returned for her Latin and algebra.

Sheila carried out her programme, and, in spite of fatigue and drowsiness, worked on bravely. The study was always a cosy place in the evening, and they generally had their supper there. Sheila was just mending the fire and putting the finishing touch to the table, when she heard her brother's key in the lock and went into the passage to greet him.

'You are as punctual as possible, Ned,' she said brightly. 'I made up my mind that you would not arrive for another quarter of an hour.'

'Oh, I walked fast from the station,' returned her brother, divesting himself of his greatcoat and following her in. 'Come, this looks snug; the wind cuts like a knife to-night, and I am as hungry as possible.'

'Then I will ring for Eppie to bring in the coffee, and you shall begin your supper before you say a word. "It is ill talking to a fasting man," as mother used to say'; and with a severe self-control that was worthy of all praise Sheila began to put sugar in the cups and to busy herself with numberless little ministering offices. It was this sweet reasonableness and

unselfishness that made Sheila such a delightful house-mate in her brother's opinion. One glance had told her that he was tired and preoccupied ; nevertheless there was a brightness in his eyes that spoke of suppressed excitement. Something had happened—something must have happened, Sheila was convinced of that ; nevertheless she filled up his coffee-cup a second time, and went on quietly with her own supper until the right moment came, and then she had her reward.

‘There, I feel better now,’ he said, pushing away his plate ; ‘but the truth was, I was so taken up that I forgot my luncheon, and I only got some tea and a sandwich late in the afternoon. Well, now you will be wanting to hear about my visit to Roffey and Williams. They are very decent people, and were uncommonly civil, though I confess I was a bit startled when I heard the poor old lady had been buried three or four days ago.’

‘Oh, I saw that too,’ returned Sheila eagerly ; ‘there was an old newspaper lying on the schoolroom table, and, curiously enough, there was the announcement of Aunt Sarah's death. I have been wondering all day why the lawyers were so anxious to see you now that the funeral is over.’

‘Well, they very soon explained matters to me,’ replied her brother. ‘Aunt Sarah had left particular instructions that no one should be asked to follow her. She wished to be buried with her husband at Appleby as quietly as possible, without giving unnecessary trouble. She told Mr. Roffey herself that her great-nephews were perfect strangers to her.’

‘But all the same you would have gone, Ned.’

‘Yes, if she had wished it ; but it is useless thinking

of that now. Sheila, what will you say when I tell you that, after all, we have not been forgotten?’

‘Do you mean that she has left us any money? Oh, do be quick and tell me’; for there was a crinkle of satisfaction round Ned’s tired eyes that Sheila had not seen for years.

‘Yes, I have grand news for you. Aunt Sarah has made me her heir. After all, we wronged the poor old thing. “Blood is thicker than water; I mean to leave my money to Julian’s eldest son; I hear he is a steady, good sort of young man”—she said those very words to Mr. Roffey a few months before she died.’

Sheila did not answer; she had turned very pale and her lip trembled; only her eyes implored him to go on.

‘I am to have the house and furniture—indeed everything, with the exception of legacies to the old servants. Mr. Roffey went into things very thoroughly with me. He thinks the invested property will bring us in about six or seven hundred a year.’

‘Ned, how is one to believe it?’ But under her breath Sheila was murmuring, ‘Thank God! thank God!’ in a perfect ecstasy of gratitude. Her suppressed emotion seemed to infect her brother, for he got up and began to pace the room.

‘It was difficult for me to grasp it. Mr. Roffey seemed to think me a trifle dense. He made me read the will for myself, and one or two of her letters, and then by degrees comprehension came. I would have told you the moment I entered the house, only I was so faint for want of food that I was afraid I should make an ass of myself; and you were so patient, dear, after your long, lonely day.’

‘I understood you—of course, I saw how it was.’

Then, as Ned flung himself into his chair again, Sheila stood behind him, with her hand resting quietly on his shoulder.

‘Shall you have enough to——’ but there was no need to finish her sentence.

‘Yes, indeed. Of course I thought of that first. I made a clean breast to Roffey ; he seemed such a decent chap, and so willing to help me. There will be at least six or seven hundred a year when all the debts are paid—think of it, Sheila,’ and Ned gave vent to a low triumphant laugh. ‘Think how we have been going without things, and what a miserable little sum has been scraped up ; at this rate it would have taken us another ten or fifteen years to pay off the debts, and now everything will be settled by midsummer. Oh, the relief of it!’ and Ned stretched out his hand for his pipe, with a sigh of satisfaction that spoke volumes.

The great tears gathered under Sheila’s eyelids ; it needed all her self-control to repress her agitation. If she had been ten years younger she would have thrown her arms round his neck and sobbed out her joy and thankfulness, but the discipline of life had taught her to restrain her feelings. ‘Dear Ned, if you only knew how I rejoice for your sake,’ she said in a voice that was hardly as calm as usual ; and Ned put down his pipe and patted her hand gently.

‘Poor old Sheila—but we will have our good times yet, please God. Do you know what my first purchase will be ?’

‘An evening dress suit, I hope,’ with an attempt at sprightliness.

‘Oh, my poor coat, I had forgotten it for the moment. But I give you my word, Sheila, that my

first thought as I walked to the station was, that you should have the best silk gown that could be bought. Hush—why, my dear, how can a little thing like that upset you!’ but Ned spoke to blank walls; Sheila had fairly run out of the room.

It was too much; she could bear no more—this little mark of Ned’s thoughtfulness for her comfort had been the finishing stroke. The relief had been too sudden and overwhelming too utterly unexpected. Even Ned owned afterwards that his wildest visions had never conjured up such an idea. ‘I thought perhaps Aunt Sarah might have left us a hundred apiece; and we should have been grateful even for that,’ he said, when later on they discussed things more calmly. It did Sheila a world of good to sit in her dark room and think over it all quietly; even the tears that would come relieved and calmed her.

‘Dear Ned was so kind,’ she said to herself; ‘it was sweet of him to think of a new frock for me; but somehow I could not take it in. I could only think of him a free man, with all his burdens lifted. Now he will be able to give up his teaching and write his books. All these years he has been working far too hard, but I could do nothing to prevent it. It would have killed him in time; Ned is not strong.’

When Sheila was calmer she went down to the room where Edward was still smoking, with Kaiser at his feet. He gave her a quick glance as she entered, and held out his hand without speaking; those two seldom needed words.

A delicious half-hour followed, and then they heard Eppie putting up the chain on the front door. ‘Let us tell her to-night, Ned,’ exclaimed Sheila; ‘the dear old thing will be so happy!’ and Edward nodded

and put down his pipe, and the next moment Eppie entered.

‘It is getting late, Miss Sheila, and I will be wishing you and Mr. Edward good-night.’ Then Eppie’s tone changed into anxiety. ‘Why, what’s to do, Miss Sheila? I shall go to my bed with a sore heart this night if there is fresh trouble for you and the master.’

‘One can cry for happiness as well as sorrow, Eppie,’ returned Sheila; but her brother interrupted her.

‘If there were any wine in the house you should drink our health, Eppie!’ he exclaimed; ‘for a wonderful bit of good fortune has come to us,—our great-aunt, Mrs. Hartree, has left me all her money.’

‘Havers,’ was the sole remark Eppie vouchsafed to this. She was sleepy and somewhat offended at the late hours they had kept the last two nights, and when Eppie was in this mood she never saw a joke.

‘But I am not jesting, Eppie. I have been to the lawyers, and they have shown me my aunt’s will; she has left me her house and furniture and a good bit of money.’

‘Keep’s a’, but you will take my breath away, Mr. Edward, for it is past belief; so no more of your havers, for it’s no reasonable to expect me to hearken to tales at this hour of the night.’ Eppie was becoming decidedly cross.

‘But it is true,’ observed Sheila. ‘Why, you foolish woman, didn’t I just say I was crying with happiness. Aunt Sarah must have been a good woman after all to remember her next of kin. We shall be quite rich, Eppie; at least, we shall have a nice little income, and there will be no need to do without things. And Eppie shall have a new dress too, and anything else she wants, shan’t she, Ned? And, oh dear, I feel I could sing for

joy' ; and Sheila's bright face would have convinced the greatest unbeliever.

Eppie's hard-featured face worked a little. ' You are no' making a mistake, Miss Sheila ? '

' No indeed ; my brother would not joke about such a thing.'

' Ah weel, but my hert failed me to hear him ; if it is true, but it is just mighty. A fortune—aye, but I am a happy woman this night' ; and now the tears were running down her cheeks as Ned grasped the work-hardened hand in silence. Eppie had been their chief comfort, the one link with their old past. ' Aye, but it caws a', ' they heard her say to herself as she went out of the room.

CHAPTER V

DREAMS

Hasten then to the end which thou hast before thee, and, throwing away idle hopes, come to thy own aid, if thou canst at all for thyself, while it is in thy power.—M. AURELIUS ANTONINUS.

IN spite of his fatigue, Edward Lassiter smoked another pipe after his sister had left him. Weary as he was with the long-drawn-out excitement of the day, he felt it would be useless to try and sleep until he had reasoned himself into a calmer state of mind. On the stand beside his chair there was a pile of small books in shabby bindings—old and well-beloved friends, who had often enlivened his solitude with sweet and wise counsels—and in his despondent hours, when life seemed flavourless and over full of care, he would fortify himself with a pregnant page or two. Chief among these were *The Essays of Elia*, *The Republic of Plato*, and *The Thoughts of M. Aurelius Antoninus*. The latter was a special favourite, and the pages bore traces of age as well as usage. He took it up now, for, as he had often told Sheila, ‘the old heathen was wiser than many a Christian,’ and read the first passage that met his eyes: ‘Labour not unwillingly, nor without regard to the common interest, nor without due consideration, nor with distraction; nor let studied

ornament set off thy thoughts, and be not either a man of many words or busy about too many things. . . . Be cheerful also, and seek not external help nor the tranquillity which others give. A man then must stand erect, not be kept erect by others.' And a little farther on: 'Never value anything as profitable to thyself which shall compel thee to break a promise, to lose thy self-respect.' And again: 'Try how the life of the good man suits thee, the life of him who is satisfied with his portion out of the whole, and satisfied with his own just acts and benevolent disposition.'

'What a grand old soul he was!' he murmured as he laid down the book; 'perhaps in the distant aeons, when the wheel of Time has ceased to revolve, one may come upon him in some far corner of paradise, very likely talking with Socrates and Plato and Buddha'; and Mr. Lassiter smiled tranquilly at his own conceit.

'A man must stand erect, not be kept erect by others'—how often those words had been to him like a flash of torchlight in the murky darkness! How they had appealed to his masculine judgment and sense of rectitude! From an angel's point of view even the most sordid and meagre life must present infinite possibilities; the battle of good and evil, with its tremendous issues, can be fought out in a garret. In the old Judæan days, when the Saviour's feet trod on this earth, it was 'the common people who heard him gladly,' the babes and little ones who crowded round so eagerly for a blessing.

All these years Edward Lassiter had set himself a task. The promise that he had given to his mother after his father's death should be fulfilled as far as lay in his power; but there were times when his courage

had failed, and he had told himself that his was the heart-breaking labour of Sisyphus.

‘One can save so little,’ he once said to Sheila; ‘we must live, and the few pounds we put by monthly seem only a drop in the ocean.’ But Sheila would never allow that.

‘At least we have paid Jenkins,’ she said once. Jenkins was the joiner that Julian Lassiter had employed, and who was now old and past work. ‘Have you forgotten, Ned, how the poor old man cried for joy when we gave him the money, and said we had saved him from the workhouse?’ but Edward, who was in a gloomy mood, was not much comforted at the recollection of Jenkins.

There were others who also wanted their money. The tradesman who had furnished Julian with canvas and paints had fallen upon evil days by no fault of his own, and was threatened with insolvency.

It was of this man that Edward was thinking as he laid aside his beloved M. Aurelius Antoninus. Only the previous week he had received a letter from him, begging for the advance of a few pounds; he had shown the letter to Sheila, and they had both made themselves extremely unhappy about it, but there was nothing to be done.

‘Jenkins has had all our reserve fund,’ he had said, ‘and there will be no more money forthcoming until that article for the *Fortnightly* is finished. Good God, how are these debts to be paid?’ and Edward paced the room in impatient misery. It was that night Sheila told herself that the burden was too crushing.

‘If the debts were only off our minds and Ned free, how happy we could be!’ she murmured. ‘Neither of us mind being poor, and Ned loves his evening

work ; he says little about it, but I know he has made his mark'; for the devoted sister read all Ned's articles, and gloried in them. 'They are just splendid!' she would say to herself.

But now the wheel of fortune had turned, and the good things of this life were to be no longer withheld from them ; and the first cheque that Ned would sign should be in favour of this very Reuben Armstrong, and all the rest of his father's creditors should be satisfied in due course.

'Roffey and Williams think I am quite right,' he went on, as he knocked out the ashes of his pipe ; 'they are honest, straightforward men, and they will help and not hinder me. Roffey tells me that last investment has turned out splendidly, and that our income will probably be nearer seven hundred a year'; and at this reflection Ned gave a low chuckling laugh. 'Eppie was quite right, he said to himself, 'it cows a'!' and then he stretched himself with a mighty yawn and took up his chamber candlestick.

Sheila heard his step pass her door, and turned happily on her pillow. She had just been dreaming that she and Ned were children again and were gathering cowslips in the meadows. 'Look at my great big cowslip ball, She,' she heard Ned say, using his old pet name for her ; 'it is so heavy it makes my hands ache'; and as he threw it at her it broke to pieces and lay at her feet a heap of shining gold coins.

'How absurd!' she muttered drowsily. And then she wandered into another dream, and it seemed to her that she and Ned were roaming hand in hand through the dim galleries of some magnificent palace ; her feet felt clogged and heavy, and Ned was urging her to walk faster. 'We must find the Master,' he said ; 'he

is an emperor, you know, and of course this is his palace.' 'But it is not any emperor that I want, Ned; I thought we were looking for Ivor'; and as the words crossed her lips Sheila woke in tears, and as usual she murmured a prayer for the beloved wanderer.

It was of Ivor she spoke the next morning as they sat at breakfast. 'If we only knew where to find him,' she said wistfully as she repeated her dreams. They had amused Ned vastly.

'The golden ball is easy to be understood,' he returned laughing; 'but whatever could have put M. Aurelius Antoninus in your head? There must be some wonderful transmission of thought between us, for I was reading a passage or two of his writing as a sort of sedative.' But at her mention of Ivor he became grave.

'It is his birthday,' she went on. 'Did you remember, dear? Let me see, Ivor is six years younger than you, so he must be seven-and-twenty. Somehow, I cannot fancy it; he seemed such a boy when we last saw him.' Sheila's face wore its sad look as she spoke. The loss of her young brother was still a heavy trouble to her; he had been so dear to her and Ned, and all his wrong-doing had failed to obliterate her tenderness.

On her bedroom mantelpiece there was a photo of him in a shabby little frame. The face was beautiful enough for a youthful angel. Julian's perfect features and fair hair were reproduced in Ivor; the eyes had a bright, eager look in them, and there was a sweet expression about the mouth. He had been little more than a boy when the photo had been taken, but during the next year or two moral deterioration had set a stamp on the features.

‘Poor dear Ivor, if we could only hear of him,’ she went on. ‘We have never had the means of advertising, Ned, but now——’ and she looked at her brother anxiously.

‘The world is a big place, Sheila,’ he returned; ‘how are we to know where he is—east or west, north or south?’ But Edward never uttered the thought that often occurred to him—‘Eight years and no word, perhaps, who knows, he may be dead’—for he knew well that no such idea had ever entered her head. That her darling was living was absolute certainty both to her and Eppie. Of course he was alive; but what if he were in any distress or difficulty?

‘I would rather break stones on the highway than live as you and Ned are living,’ he had once said to her in youthful scorn. ‘Ned is like Gaffer Morton’s blind horse, who is drawing loads all day. His name is Ned too. I am always so sorry for the poor old fellow; it seems such a hopeless sort of life. I got him some carrots the other day, and dangled them before his nose. My word, if he did not whinny in quite a friendly way when I spoke to him next day!’ Sheila often recalled this speech; she loved to think how good Ivor was to animals, and how he hated to kill even an insect.

‘It has as much right to live as I have,’ he would say.

Sheila would willingly have pursued the subject, but Ned had no more time at his disposal; breakfast and luncheon were always hurried meals, as lessons occupied most of the day.

A nondescript meal—a combination of tea and supper—was always ready by half-past six, and this was the most sociable hour of the day; though Ned would often start up from his chair declaring that he

had no more time to waste in talk, unless Sheila wished him to sit up all night. But this evening was to be an exception to the rule. Ned had promised not to put pen to paper. 'We will just cackle over our golden egg like Mother Goose and her Gander,' he said, as he buttoned up his thin greatcoat—for the same unkindly east wind prevailed; and Sheila beamed at him in answer, and then went off in search of Eppie, for she was bent on providing an unusually festal meal by way of inaugurating their good fortune.

'Don't you think we might have a pigeon-pie?' but Sheila spoke with bated breath, as though she was somewhat ashamed of her extravagance. 'The dear fellow nearly starved himself yesterday. And it is Ivor's birthday; and you know, Eppie, it is such a favourite dish of Mr. Edward's, though he has not tasted it for years.' Then Eppie, who had first looked aghast at the suggestion, calmed down.

'Well, there's no need to reckon the pence now,' she said oracularly; 'so, as it is market-day, I'll just take my basket and get two of the plumpest pigeons I can find, and a bit of tender steak. You leave it to me, Miss Sheila. I might toss up some pancakes too—there is nothing that Mr. Edward likes better than pancakes. Aye, but it is just mighty,' relapsing into her vernacular at the visions of bliss that unfolded themselves with these homely details. 'Isn't it mother that always said, "Eppie is the wumman that will be a gran' han' at the bakin'"? Well, I'll hae to be movin'; but I doubt we're ower extravegint'; and Eppie gave a little dry clucking laugh which always expressed supreme satisfaction.

Kaiser gave a surprised sniff or two at the delicious odours that pervaded the small house that evening.

His canine instinct soon made him aware that some unusual feast was being provided for his delectation. A vision of hot savoury bones mingled with his dreams, and every movement on Eppie's part was followed by a heavy thump of his tail on the hearth-rug.

Sheila crooned a little song as she went softly to and fro. She had bought two or three bunches of spring flowers to adorn the supper-table. A clear little fire burned cheerily in the grate, and a small gray kitten—a forlorn, half-starved little creature that Mr. Lassiter had brought in one bitter evening for warmth and shelter—was playing with Kaiser's thumping tail. Kaiser, who, like his master, had a benevolent nature, had at once taken the poor little waif and stray under his protection. 'The Orphan,' as Ned called her, thrived amazingly in the kindly atmosphere, and was fast developing all sorts of pretty tricks. Kaiser only wagged his tail in tolerant fashion when 'the Orphan' in merry moments executed fantastic dances on his prostrate form. On cold evenings he even allowed her to take her nap crouched snugly on his glossy coat; and it was pretty to watch their games together—the patience and gentleness with which Kaiser bore the caprices and exactions of his small companion.

Edward had been detained later at the school that evening, but his face looked bright as he stood at the door regarding the peaceful scene; and Kaiser jumped up with so loud a bark of welcome, that 'the Orphan' fled in dismay under the table.

'There is going to be a change in the weather,' observed Mr. Lassiter presently, when he had done sufficient justice to the good things provided for him. The pigeon-pie had been highly praised, and the pancakes were pronounced perfect. Eppie had been over-

whelmed with compliments when she came to clear the table, which she received with inward delight and outward incredulity. 'Havers, Mr. Edward,' she returned gruffly ; nevertheless Eppie was a proud woman that night.

'March will go out like a lamb, mark my words, Sheila,' went on her brother. 'Well, I have had a long talk with Martin to-night. The old fellow was quite demonstrative. He shook my hand and wished me joy of my good luck. He even said he would find it difficult to replace me, but I reminded him that Gregson was wanting a berth. We shall have to keep on this house until June. By the by, my dear, Mr. Roffey wants me to go down to Uplands and have a look at the house, and of course you must go with me. Do you think next Wednesday will suit you?'

'Oh yes, I should think so ; Mrs. Goulburn is always very kind and considerate in sparing me. As you have had your talk with Mr. Martin, Ned, I suppose I ought to tell Mrs. Goulburn that she must look out for another governess. Fancy my being a lady at large ! But I daresay I shall find plenty to do. Uplands is country, is it not, Ned ? I think father said that it was rather a pretty place.'

'Yes, I believe so' ; but Ned spoke absently. 'Sheila, I have got all sorts of plans for the future. Do you know, I should like to go to Oxford and work up for my degree. It would be quite possible. I could have a lodging in the town.' But interrupting himself, as Sheila looked rather disturbed at this, 'Of course it would cost a lot of money, so it would require a good deal of consideration. There is something else I might do,' and Ned's eyes gleamed very brightly through his spectacles—'I might set about that book.'

Then Sheila nodded with decided approval.

During the last few years of stress and toil, Ned had been unable to develop his literary tastes. His articles were all written to suit the editor who employed him, and he had often playfully compared himself to a cab-horse. 'I never get out of the ordinary groove; if I followed my own bent, I should just get the lash.' And in his dreamy, unpractical way he would talk too of a historical novel that he longed to write. 'I cannot get it out of my head,' he would say. 'The plot must be laid in the days of the Stuarts—probably just before the Civil War broke out; there is no other period of English history so fascinating and so terrible.'

'But there is *John Inglesant*,' Sheila had objected.

'Yes, and a grander book was never written. But I should not encroach on Shorthouse's masterpiece; the mine is too rich—it is almost inexhaustible—a hundred books could be written on the subject.'

'Do you really think so, Ned?'

'I am sure of it'; and Mr. Lassiter spoke with unusual animation. 'It is extraordinary how vividly some of the characters move before me. I can even see the rooms. It is a house divided against itself: a gentle, narrow-minded, Puritan mother; a hot-blooded Royalist father; sons and daughter ranged in rival camps; the great pageantry of battlefields'; and Ned would wax so eloquent on this theme that Sheila grew almost as eager as he. But when she proposed that he should set about it at once, he always shook his head very sadly. 'It is only a dream, a castle in the air,' he returned with a sigh. 'Where am I to get my books of reference, Sheila, or even time to study? I should have to read volumes, to take notes, to verify facts. There could be no guesswork, no tampering with truth,

no glossing over of unexpected difficulties ; the stern, unvarnished truth should be told ; no distorted facts, no exaggerated and unreal romance for me.'

'Then I am afraid, Ned, that your Stuart romance will never be written,' replied Sheila regretfully ; and though Edward had winced at the word 'never,' he evidently agreed with her.

But now the subject had been brought forward again, and Ned had announced his intention of setting about the book, and Sheila had applauded his resolution. 'What a splendid idea !' she had exclaimed ; 'you will be master of your own time, and there is sure to be some room that we could turn into a study.' Sheila privately made up her mind that the best room and the best view should be chosen for him. But Edward interrupted her.

'Softly, softly, my dear girl. You do not quite grasp the matter. I am hardly likely to find the books I want at Uplands. What would you say, Sheila, if, when we are comfortably settled at The Moorings, I were to go up to London for a time, and leave you to keep house with Eppie ? I would get a lodging near the British Museum, and go to the reading-room every day. It would be just the thing I should like—if you are sure you would not be dull ?'

For a moment Sheila was conscious of a feeling of disappointment—it had not entered her mind that her brother would wish to leave her ; but her common-sense and unselfishness soon gained the mastery. 'Dear Ned, let it be so if you wish it,' she said gently. 'Uplands is not far from town, and I daresay you would often run down for a few hours.'

'It would only be for a time, my dear, until I had got my facts together. Now I think of it, I could

always run down for the week-end, and we could spend our Sundays together'; and Sheila's face so brightened at this that Ned secretly determined that no amount of engrossing work should tempt him to disappoint her.

CHAPTER VI

A SILENT ROMANCE

Heart to heart was never known ;
Mind with mind did never meet ;
We are columns left alone,
Of a temple once complete.

CRANCH.

MR. LASSITER was right in his prognostications, and the last days of March were conspicuous by their lamblike qualities. The east wind, with its nips and pinches and swirls of slaty dust, had disappeared ; the atmosphere was milder, and held out the promise of spring ; the brown hedgerows showed signs of bursting buds and tiny green shoots ; and April appeared in a dainty and tender mood, mingling sunshine and sweet, refreshing showers. It was on some such springlike day that the Lassiters set out for their holiday excursion—hitherto a rare pleasure in their hard-working lives—to visit their new home and make acquaintance with the surrounding neighbourhood, Uplands being *terra incognita* to them.

Edward had been up to town again, and matters had been definitely arranged between him and the lawyers. The old servants were to receive their legacies and be paid off, and the house was to be given into the charge of a respectable caretaker until

the time when he and his sister should be free to take possession of their new home. Neither of them was willing to shirk their responsibilities, but they indulged the hope that the beginning of June would see them settled at The Moorings. There would be much to do before then. Edward would have the settlement of his father's debts, and as one or two of the creditors were dead, there would be some amount of trouble in finding out their representatives. Sheila, too, would have sufficient occupation in replenishing her meagre wardrobe. In this matter Ned was inclined to be extravagant, and she had some difficulty in bringing him to reason. 'We shall not be rich, and there is no need for so many things,' she said to him; 'three new gowns are all I shall want for the present.'

On this festive occasion Sheila wore her old clothes. Nevertheless, as she sat opposite to him in the railway carriage, Ned looked at her more than once with secret approval. 'I wonder what you have done to yourself, Sheila,' he exclaimed at last; 'you look very nice, my dear, and half a dozen years younger!' Then Sheila blushed in quite a girlish way. After all, thirty was not a great age, and Sheila's simple, quiet life had preserved her youth wonderfully.

People who cared for her always said Sheila Lassiter was a sweet-looking woman. Without being exactly handsome—for her features were not clearly cut enough for beauty—she was at times exceedingly attractive in a quiet way. Her eyes were very soft and frank, and her mouth lovely. Little Betty Woodford had been won by her voice and smile. 'My nice Miss Lassiter' she always called her.

Sheila often spoke of herself as an old maid. 'No thoroughfare for lovers' might have been written over

the door of the little house in Brook Street, and certainly only Edward's shabby hat was ever hung up in the hall.

Sheila seldom troubled about such things. If she had her moods of discouragement, of inward rebellion, no one suffered from them. But indeed she tried as far as possible to put such thoughts from her ; it was part of her life's discipline ; it was not worse for her than for Edward. 'Neither of us can marry,' she would say to herself ; 'we are too poor. Besides, there is no one—no one !'

Once, in the old days, while her mother was living, there seemed as though there would be some one. A friend of Edward's, a certain Mark Telford, had appeared very frequently on the scene ; perhaps Sheila's soft eyes were the magnets that drew him.

It was a very shadowy little romance, almost wordless on Mark's part ; he only came and looked, and by and by he went away, and that was the end of it ; but for a time it occupied Sheila's thoughts. Love has its dumb as well as its spoken language ; it can convey its tenderest messages by signs ; a look may convey the weightiest meaning ; even silence can be eloquent ; the touch of a hand may be magnetic.

Mark was poor and honourable ; he came of a good stock, but his prospects left much to be desired. When he set out like the prince in the fairy tale to seek his fortunes, he said no word to lead Sheila to suppose that she would be the end and object of all his efforts ; yet in the depths of her soul she knew that she was dear to him. 'If he had only said one word—one little word, to tell me so !' she had thought, when the news of his death had been brought to her. Some vague word had indeed passed between them on the

evening before Mark had left England. They had met at the house of a mutual friend—a little gathering of young people had been there to wish him good-bye—all his old neighbours and companions, Sheila amongst them. Mark was very quiet and somewhat out of spirits, but they had no opportunity for private talk; one of Mark's sisters followed him about like a shadow. Once, when the three were pacing the garden paths together, Lucy Telford chattered to them both about a love-story that had reached her ears that day.

‘It was quite a medieval romance!’ she exclaimed; ‘one seldom hears of such a thing nowadays. Nora Middleton was only nineteen when Robert Clare went to India. They were not engaged even, but there was a sort of understanding that she would wait. Aunt Joanna says that Nora was so pretty in those days.’

‘Are you talking about old Miss Middleton?’ asked Mark. ‘Hurry up, Luce; there is no time for a long story.’

‘Old Miss Middleton! why, she is only a little over forty. But you see Joyce is young Miss Middleton now. Well, he has come back—Robert Clare has come back—after twenty-two years. And they say Nora has refused more than one good offer for his sake; and they are to be married; and he is just as much in love with her as though she were still young and pretty.’

‘Of course he is,’ muttered Mark, as though to himself; ‘do you suppose all those years go for nothing?’ And then he turned round abruptly to Sheila, and even in that dim light under the trees she could see the brightness of his eyes. ‘Could you have waited?’ he asked a little breathlessly.

‘Yes, if I cared for any one it would be easy to wait,’

returned Sheila quietly ; but her heart was beating a little faster than usual.

‘ I need not have asked the question ’—in a voice so low that Lucy could not catch the words ; ‘ I know you would be faithful. If we only dared——’ And here he pressed closer to her. Oh, if they had only been alone !

‘ Mark, they are calling for you ; we must go in. Don’t keep him, Sheila.’ Lucy was hurrying them towards the house. She had pushed herself between them in her affectionate, girlish way, and taken an arm of each.

‘ Don’t be a goose, Lucy ’—Mark’s tone was strained and irritable—‘ if you are in such a hurry you can go on, and Miss Lassiter and I can follow you.’

‘ But it is you they are wanting.’ Lucy’s voice rose shrilly and insistent ; it brought a little group round them in a moment.

‘ Here he is ! What do you mean by deserting us like this, old fellow ?’ And Mark was pinioned and carried off to the house.

‘ If we only dared——’ What was it that Mark would have said if only the opportunity had been vouchsafed him ? But Sheila was never to know that. A quiet hand-shake, a whispered ‘ God bless you !’ that lingered long in her memory, and Mark Telford passed out of her life for ever.

Two years later he died of malarial fever in West Africa ; and a certain vague sweet hope in Sheila’s heart died also.

One wonders how many thousands of these dumb, unfinished love - stories have been lived and then died a natural death—budding romances that never blossomed, nipped by some unkindly and adverse

way of circumstance, and yet stored in a hidden recess by many a faithful heart. That little old maid, for example, whose prim ways are so irritating, who jars on one with her endless gossip and her girlish affectations and fineries, even she has a faded flower or two that a loving hand had given her. Once she was young and the hopes of womanhood dawned brightly on her horizon. And then He—it was always He with a capital letter—rode away and forgot all about her; and the world grew very gray and cold for a time.

‘When I was young? Oh yes, my dear, of course I expected to be married; we all do, you know. And when one has good looks——’ Here there would be a girlish toss of the head, and the lean little shoulders would shrug in the old artless fashion. ‘He was very attentive—every one noticed it; they said he made me so conspicuous. Poor fellow, he was very much in earnest—quite unhappy, in fact. But he had to go; and he never came back.’ It was a round-faced chit who asked the question.

‘No!’—and the gentle little spinster seemed to swallow something—‘he settled out there, and in time he married—in time, you understand. I think men are more impatient than we are—they do not like waiting.’ Miss Rachel never finished her sentence, or she might have added with truth—‘perhaps we do not like it either.’

No one—not even her brother—had guessed at Sheila’s poor little wordless romance. When they settled at Cottingdean they lost touch with the Telfords. If a girl’s fond hopes and dreams were buried in that West African grave, no one knew it; and after a time Sheila forgot it too. Only she would say to

herself in lonely moments that Mark was gone, and that there was no one now.

Sheila felt an unusual sense of exhilaration as she sat opposite Edward in the railway compartment. There were other passengers in the carriage, so he unfolded his paper and Sheila looked out of the window. Both were pleasantly surprised by the shortness of their journey.

Uplands was two or three miles from the station, and Edward Lassiter suggested that they should take a fly and drive straight to the house. One of Mrs. Hartree's old servants had consented to remain as caretaker, and would give them luncheon.

Sheila gave Ned's arm a playful little squeeze as they drove away from the station. 'Isn't it just like a fairy tale? Fancy having a house of our own that we have never seen, with furniture and plate and linen all ready for use! I feel as though I were a princess in the *Arabian Nights*, with a benevolent genie at hand.'

'But you must not expect a mansion,' returned her brother. 'I recollect my father speaking of The Moorings once as rather a dull, old-fashioned house.'

"It was a cottage originally, and then some one bought it and built a large and more modern house, still keeping the cottage rooms. I thought it rather ugly myself"—I remember so well his saying that. "And the cottage part is certainly very dull; but the views from the upper windows are remarkably fine."

'Father never cared for anything but picturesque red brick houses,' returned Sheila. 'But after Brook Street I expect we shall find it palatial; our little rooms are so very dark and low. But,' interrupting herself, 'I don't call this country, Ned; it is very towny and suburban.'

They were driving slowly up a wide steep road, with houses on either side, and seats here and there for the benefit of pedestrians.

‘The air seems remarkably fine, though’; and Mr. Lassiter inhaled the strong, free breeze with decided pleasure. ‘This is not Uplands, so we had better reserve our criticism for the present.’ The driver, who had overheard this remark, turned round to address him.

‘They call this Hillington, sir. It is a rare climb, as you see. Uplands lies on the top of the hill. I suppose you will have heard that the old lady at The Moorings is dead? She was a great age, they do say; but quite peart-like and with all her faculties.’

‘Yes, we know Mrs. Hartree is dead,’ returned Mr. Lassiter curtly. Perhaps it was owing to their retired life that he and Sheila had shy, reserved ways with strangers, for he sought no further information.

‘He was a stiddy sort of taciturn chap,’ remarked the coachman later; ‘but he was not squeamish about a sixpence. I should say they are a tidy sort, and you might go farther and fare worse’; for honest Jem was an oracle in the bar-room of the Cross Keys.

Sheila made no more disparaging remarks, and after a time matters improved. They branched off from the main road, skirting a pleasant village green, with the church and vicarage adjoining it.

The churchyard was pretty and well kept, and shaded by yew trees; and there was a picturesque lych-gate. As they drove slowly past, a tall man in clerical attire came out of the vicarage gate, and looked at them rather searchingly as he responded to Jem’s respectful greeting.

He had a thin, ascetic-looking face, and dark, closely-

cropped hair : but there was something striking in his carriage, and Sheila's curiosity prevailed over her shyness.

'I suppose that is the vicar?' she asked.

'Yes, ma'am,' returned Jem, pleased to have an opening given to him. 'That's the parish church, St. Jude's; and the vicar is the Rev. Luke Brett. He is a good sort of a parson, and does a deal for the place. Not being a married man, his aunt lives with him and keeps his house.'

Sheila felt vaguely surprised and disappointed to hear this. She thought it would have been nice to have a motherly woman at the vicarage, with a family of children or young people in whom she could take interest. She thought the vicar was a little severe of aspect; though she acknowledged he held himself well and had an aristocratic air.

'Rather an unusual type of face,' observed her brother in an interested tone. And then they came out on a broad road, with handsome houses and prettily laid-out gardens. The air grew fresher here. Presently Sheila caught sight of a little sandy lane or path winding between gorse bushes, with two or three houses lying snugly in a hollow.

'Oh, Ned, what a pretty corner!' she was exclaiming, when Jem suddenly pulled up.

'The second house is The Moorings—the one with the firs in front,' he said, pointing with his whip. 'The first house is Heathside, and belongs to the Lorimers; but they mostly lives abroad. And they do say that Mrs. Lorimer's health will oblige them to give up the house. Yon is the Old Cottage,' pointing now to a low, pleasant-looking cottage, which, in spite of its humble appearance, appealed to Sheila's fancy; the dark woodwork of the porch blended with the creamy

tone of the walls so harmoniously, and it looked so peaceful, with its outlook on the tiny common.

‘Oh, Ned, do let us get out and walk!’ she said eagerly. ‘There is no need to drive up to the door.’ And Edward assenting to this, they dismissed their driver. Both of them were good walkers, and the road to the station would be all downhill. Jem gave them one more piece of gratuitous information before he drove off to refresh himself at the Cross Keys.

‘That’s the golf-house,’ pointing to a tall, substantial-looking building, ‘and the links lie beyond; it is all common or moorland after that. People do say that they can see the sea from the golf-links, though I have never seen it myself; but as it is only twenty-one miles as the crow flies, maybe they are right.’

The brother and sister stood still for a moment in the narrow path to admire the pleasant prospect. ‘It seems a peaceful little world, doesn’t it, She?’ and Ned bent his head and took in another long draught of the invigorating breeze. ‘One could live here happily —“the world forgetting, by the world forgot.” I think we shall be content with our new moorings.’

‘It is just lovely!’ and Sheila’s tone expressed great rapture. ‘Think what it will be when the gorse is in bloom!’ But it was later on when Sheila described the rippling sea of gold that seemed to stretch to their very gates, and the honey-sweet breath of the furze on warm sunny days.

‘Heathside seems a pretty place,’ observed Mr. Lassiter. ‘Look at the touch of blue haze between the cottages; we must have a look round that corner after luncheon’; and then at the sound of footsteps behind them Ned stood back in the narrow path to let the new-comer pass.

It was a young lady walking beside her bicycle, who bowed gravely as Ned lifted his hat. She had rather a plain face, but her figure looked trim and graceful. To Sheila's surprise she stopped at the gate of the Old Cottage.

'I wonder if she lives there!' ejaculated Sheila, feeling some natural curiosity about such close neighbours, for the gate of The Moorings opened full on the Old Cottage. But the next moment she had a sudden shock of surprise at the sight of the little figure running out from the porch.

'Why, Ned, it is actually my little friend Miss Woodford,' she said so audibly that Betty heard her, and the next moment the impulsive little creature came flying down the road to meet them.

CHAPTER VII

AT THE MOORINGS

The world would be better and brighter if people were taught the duty of being happy, as well as the happiness of doing our duty. To be happy ourselves is a most effectual contribution to the happiness of others.—
SIR JOHN LUBBOCK.

I find nonsense singularly refreshing.—TALLEYRAND.

‘MARTHA, it is my nice Miss Lassiter!’ they both heard her exclaim. Betty’s little brown face was glowing with surprise and pleasure. Sheila was never quite sure that the child did not put up her face to be kissed, but if so she was too shy to respond.

‘Why, you don’t mean to say that you live in that charming old cottage, and that we shall be near neighbours?’ she asked; and Betty’s eyes grew wider with astonishment.

‘Near neighbours!’ she gasped. ‘Are you coming to live in our dear little sleepy hollow?’ Then, as a light broke on her, ‘Surely you are not old Mrs. Hartree’s niece and nephew who are coming to The Moorings?’

‘We certainly lay claim to that relationship, Miss Woodford,’ returned Ned, with an amused look. ‘The world is very small, you know, and life is full of surprises, and I can assure you that Mrs. Hartree was really our great-aunt.’ But Betty was too excited to listen.

‘Marty, oh, Marty, do come here!’ she exclaimed. ‘Such a wonderful thing has happened!’ Then the tall young lady who had passed them in Sandy Lane came forward a little reluctantly.

‘I hope you will excuse my little sister,’ she said apologetically to Sheila; ‘she is very much excited at recognising an old acquaintance.’

‘Well, it is a surprise to both of us,’ returned Sheila frankly. ‘We thought not a creature would know us in Uplands. We have never been here before in our lives—indeed my brother has only seen Mrs. Hartree two or three times—so you may imagine our astonishment on hearing that she had left him The Moorings.’

‘We heard that some relations were to have it,’ returned Miss Woodford. But Betty struck in:

‘Yes, and we were so surprised when Nanny told us; for, though we saw so much of dear old Mrs. Hartree, she never once mentioned you by name, and we had no idea that she had any one belonging to her. What a pity to think that she was lonely all those years, when she might have had you to look after her!’

‘Betty, dear,’ observed her sister gently, ‘I think we are keeping Miss Lassiter standing too long. You have come down to see the house, have you not? I know Nanny was expecting luncheon company.’

‘We have the day before us, and it is quite early,’ returned Sheila, who seemed a little unwilling to part with such pleasant acquaintances. Then the irrepressible Betty chimed in again.

‘Marty, you might ask Miss Lassiter and her brother to have tea with us—father would be so pleased.’ Then her sister reddened a little and seemed slightly embarrassed. Betty’s unconventionality and

neglect of etiquette often placed her in awkward positions.

‘We shall be very glad,’ she began shyly, ‘and the Cottage is so close——’ but Sheila, who had been prepared with a civil refusal, thinking Ned would be bored by the invitation, was secretly surprised when he took the answer on himself.

‘Thank you, you are very kind, and I am sure my sister will be delighted. Will four o’clock suit you, for we have to catch our train?’ Then, on Miss Woodford’s answering him that any hour would be convenient, they parted with mutual goodwill.

‘Betty, how could you do such a thing?’ remonstrated her sister, when they were out of earshot. ‘You have only seen Miss Lassiter twice, and you know that they are perfect strangers to father and me. Nanny would have given them tea, and there was not the least occasion for us to invite them; they will think it so odd and forward on our parts.’

‘Forward!’ repeated Betty, firing up at once at the obnoxious word, and tossing her brown mane after the fashion of a little Shetland pony—for Betty had a temper of her own. ‘How can you be so prudish and old-maidish, Martha? Haven’t I told you a dozen times how much I like that nice Miss Lassiter, and how much I want to know her; and are they not going to be our near neighbours? Why, we live at their very gate, and of course they will only think we are kind and hospitable and that sort of thing. I suppose’—in the same ruffled tones—‘it is Mr. Lassiter who frightens you; but he is not a bit young, you know, and I am sure he thought us rather nice for asking him—he certainly looked pleased.’

‘Well, dear, I hope so,’ replied Martha amiably.

‘Anyhow, they are coming, so I must get Jane to bake some scones.’

‘We must just make the best of it,’ she thought, as she hurried off to the kitchen. ‘It would never do for Betty to get into one of her tantrums—that would spoil everything. If she would only remember that she is grown up now,’ the elder sister said to herself. Betty was too childish for her years, too outspoken and impulsive. She never would act as though she were nineteen, and the worst of it was her father only indulged and spoilt her.

Her eight years’ seniority had enabled Martha to exercise a maternal supervision over her young sister since their mother’s death, and her calm judgment and practical good sense somewhat counteracted her father’s injudicious tenderness. Not that Martha was unduly strict or severe with what Mr. Woodford termed ‘Bet’s skittishness.’ She was far too gentle and loving for that, but it could not be denied that she had her moments of anxiety.

Betty was wilful at times. She would have her own way, and was not always to be coerced and coaxed into reason. She had a queer little code of her own, which she maintained with a considerable amount of obstinacy. If people chose to be stupid and censorious, that was not her fault, averred Betty. But Martha’s experience had taught her that the world was somewhat harsh and exacting, and that there were certain hard-and-fast rules which it was not well to transgress—that one may have the harmlessness of the dove, and yet it behoved such an one to walk warily.

‘Perhaps Betty is right, and I am a little prudish,’ sighed Martha; ‘and I daresay, after all, they may be pleased with the little attention.’ And then with much tact she contrived to smooth Betty’s aggrieved feelings.

Meanwhile Ned was saying—‘Your little friend will be quite an acquisition, She. It was really a pretty attention on her part to ask us to tea, and I thought it would be rather churlish of us to refuse.’

‘I am afraid I was going to do so though, only you were so ready with your answer,’ returned Sheila. ‘I thought Miss Woodford looked rather shy and embarrassed. I suspect Betty is startling at times. I really like the look of Miss Woodford, Ned.’

‘So did I,’ but Ned’s tone was not enthusiastic. ‘She is rather a plain young woman though. But your little brown Betty is quite a piquant little person. Well, shall we go in, She?’ and Ned unlatched the gate of The Moorings. Sheila gazed round her almost with awe. There was a row of firs in front; and on one side of the house there was a little lawn shaded by the same trees; on the right side there stretched a small, old-fashioned garden which at once attracted their attention; a long pergola covered with ivy led to the kitchen-garden, and other arches, also ivy-covered, led to a small tennis-lawn.

All along this side of the house ran a narrow, passage-like conservatory; beyond, across a flagged court, they could see the stables and a cottage for the coachman.

‘Do you see where they have built on to the old cottage?’ began Ned, anxious to explore his new possessions; but at the sound of his voice a little old woman, with a brown, nutcracker face, came round the corner of the house and dropped quite a rustic curtsey. Nanny Weare had lived all her life at Uplands and knew nothing of modern ways.

‘Would you be pleased to go round to the front of the house, sir?’ she said, wiping her hands on her

coarse but scrupulously clean apron, and they retraced their steps accordingly and waited meekly on the doorstep until Nanny admitted them.

The entrance hall was not imposing, being a mere passage, and the staircase was narrow and rather steep.

On either side of the door was a good-sized, comfortable sitting-room, well furnished in an old-fashioned way. One or two cabinets in the drawing-room were Sheraton, and contained some beautiful old china; but the dark oil-paintings in massive gold frames in the dining-room made Sheila secretly shudder—they were so crude and bad. But she forbore from any remark in Nanny's presence.

'How homelike and comfortable it all looks,' she observed; 'and what delightful easy-chairs!' And indeed Sheila felt that she had reason to be content. A bright fire was burning cheerily, and the table was already laid for luncheon. Sheila's housewifely eyes at once noted the old-fashioned cut glass and massive silver spoons and forks.

'Maybe you will like to be looking round while I dish up,' observed Nanny. 'I have put hot water and towels in two rooms'; and they at once took the hint.

'Shall we go upstairs first?' whispered Sheila, as her brother seemed disposed to explore a low, dull-looking room in front of him.

'There is nought to see in the cottage,' observed Nanny. 'The rooms were never used, to my knowledge, except as storerooms and such-like. During the last year or two my mistress was forced to stay upstairs, and we turned the best bedroom into a sitting-room for her. It is the room over the drawing-room, and has a grand view.'

It was a large, pleasant-looking sitting-room that

they entered first, with one window in front and another at the side, overlooking the ivy-covered pergola and tennis-lawn. A simultaneous cry of admiration burst from the lips of both brother and sister as they looked at the prospect.

A grand view indeed! A perfect panorama stretched before them. On one side Sleepy Hollow, Sandy Lane, the Old Cottage, and the golf-house, and a white road winding into the distance. The other window commanded a splendid view of moorland. A vast expanse of furze and heath with gently sloping hills, and glimpses of dark woods and fine plantations, the soft blue and purple tints of the horizon giving them a sudden sense of joy and freedom.

'My word, this is glorious, Sheila!' exclaimed Ned, but she only pressed his arm in silence, as though he had no words at her command.

'It is a dream,' she said at last. 'Think of waking up to this every morning. How is one to believe in it?' and Sheila laughed softly, though the tears were in her eyes. 'It will be like living on the outskirts of the Land of Beulah; these must be the Delectable Mountains; they are not high certainly, but one can imagine them veiling their heads in cloudland.'

'I can't see the mountains, my dear—it is so much a cloud-effect you are noticing; but all the same, it is a fine view.'

'Yes, and this must be your study, Ned. No, no,' he shook his head, 'you may talk and argue until you have lost your voice, but I made up my mind to this directly I crossed the threshold.'

'Indeed no, Sheila, I will not agree to anything so preposterous.' Nevertheless, there was a longing in

in Ned's eyes. But he was to know that wilful woman would have her way.

'This will be your *sanctum sanctorum*. Here you and your beloved M. Aurelius Antoninus and Charles Lamb and other congenial spirits will hold high revelry. Here'—still holding him with a firm grasp—'you will write not one but many books, and each will be better than the last. "Have you read Edward Lassiter's new book, my dear?" I can hear the British husbands putting that question to their better halves. "It is one of the best books of the day." There, sir! Now, will your mightiness be pleased to come and see my room?' and Sheila marched him into the opposite apartment, which had a lovely view too, although it was more limited.

Of course, Sheila carried her point. Nothing that Edward could or did say would move her. Poor Aunt Sarah's room should be hers; it was a charming room, and she could get rid of the four-post bedstead and the dingy hangings. Edward could sleep in that nice little back room. There were two or three of the original cottage rooms vacant, besides those the servants had occupied. Upstairs there were two immense attics, with low windows commanding delightful views. Ned was half-inclined to choose one of them for his own use, but his sister dissuaded him. 'They are too large,' she objected; 'they must be cold in winter, and you will be far more snug in that cheerful little blue room downstairs. Besides, I should feel lonely if you were not on the same floor.' And then, when this point was carried, Nanny summoned them to luncheon.

Well, if they behaved like two children, one could hardly wonder at it, for they had worked much and played little, even in their youth, and, as Ned remarked, they had arrears of holidays owing to them. 'We are

going to have a good old time,' he said, as he filled his glass with excellent Marsala. 'Here is to your health, Sheila. Long life and happiness to you, my dear!' But Sheila's hand shook a little as she put down her glass.

'We are at our Moorings, Ned. I think it is such a lovely name for a home, and I like little Betty's name of Sleepy Hollow too. Somehow I feel almost oppressed to think of it all. It seems too much happiness to be living in this dear old house alone with you, Ned; and if only Ivor——'

Then Edward, who had finished his luncheon, jumped up rather hastily. 'We must keep our talk for our homeward journey,' he said; 'we have not half seen the place yet.' But to Sheila's secret amusement he went back to his prospective study. He was soon so busy planning low bookcases and settling where his writing-table was to stand, that Sheila left him at last to his own devices and went down to Nanny.

She found that the old woman was expecting her. She had washed up, and was sitting in her elbow-chair by the kitchen fire, with a great white cat curled up on her lap. In her neat black dress and quaint mob-cap, Nanny looked a perfect picture.

'There's plenty that I ought to be showing you, ma'am,' she said, as she put the cat down on the hearth-rug. 'Aye, Dick's a fine fellow,' as Sheila stooped to caress him. 'We've had him since he was a little un, and he is that clever and companionable that he might be a human creature. Dick's going with me when I leave The Moorings. We are getting old, Dick and me, but we shall go nestling along'—a term which rather puzzled Sheila at the time, but she often heard it later on, used to denote feebleness and want of power.

Nanny grew rather loquacious as the afternoon wore

on—evidently Sheila's quiet sympathy had won her. Her mistress's death had been a great grief. 'Fifty-four years have I lived here,' she said, shaking her head with a slightly palsied movement. 'I was a strapping wench of sixteen when Mrs. Hartree engaged me. "You serve me faithful, Nanny," she says to me, "and you'll never repent it."

'And she spoke gospel truth too, Miss Lassiter,' and Nanny wiped away a tear or two; 'for I am a rich woman this day, and Mr. Roffey tells me that I am to live rent-free in one of mistress's cottages near the mill, and that it is to be furnished for me when I leave here. "You have been a faithful servant, Nanny, and I am very glad that Mrs. Hartree has remembered you so kindly," he said. Oh, he is a civil, kind-spoken gentleman; and he had a friendly word for Anne and Emma Parkins, too.'

'Were they Aunt Sarah's servants too, Nanny?'

'Yes, to be sure, Miss Lassiter. Emma had lived with her five-and-thirty years. She was her maid, and of late years she slept in her room. Anne had one of the village girls under her; she trained her for service. She was only here for twenty years, but they both got handsome legacies. Anne is not much above forty, and they do say that she and Joe Martin are going to be cried in church; and a good job too, for Joe has waited for her those fifteen years.'

Nanny talked much of her mistress, as she opened presses and store-cupboards. The piles of lavender-scented table- and bed-linen, the shelves of glass and china, were wonderful sights to Sheila, who remembered the thin, much-darned tablecloths in Brook Street.

'The linen was always Emma's charge,' went on Nanny. 'Missis was always so proud of her linen-

press ; those cloths with the small spot were her favourites, she thought a heap of them ' ; and Nancy sighed at the idea of all these treasured possessions passing into the hands of strangers.

Sheila well understood the old woman's feeling, and as Nanny closed the linen-press she put her hand over the shaking fingers.

' I am so sorry for you, Nanny,' she said softly. ' Fifty-four years of faithful service is almost a lifetime ; indeed, you well deserve your rest.'

' Hard work never moithered me,' returned Nanny ; ' I was never one to sit idle. But when a body has turned seventy, and the rheumatism gets into one's bones, one is forced to give up a bit. But at the Mill Cottage Dick and I will nestle along famously.'

' There is one thing I have forgotten,' observed Sheila as they went back to the warm kitchen where Nancy had reigned supreme for nearly fifty years. ' My brother begged me to tell you that if there be anything you would like to have out of the kitchen or house-keeper's room, you are welcome to take it.' Then Nanny's melancholy face brightened up at once.

' That is real handsome of Mr. Lassiter ; and I was going to make bold and beg for my old elbow-chair. And there's the clock too ; haven't I wound it up for nearly fifty years, and many a evening when the girls were gallivanting'—Emma and Anne were always girls to Nanny—' it has kept me company like.'

' Of course you shall have the clock. But surely there are some other things you would like?' But Nanny was not grasping. A certain tea-pot she had always used, and ' some pink and white chaney,' as she called it, an eider-down quilt, and her mistress's Bible and Prayer Book, and the spectacles she had

always used, proved the limits of her desire—though later on Sheila found many cherished odds and ends which she carried over to the Mill Cottage. Nanny found herself the proud possessor of Aunt Sarah's best silk dress and the old fur-lined cloak that had kept her warm. Indeed, many a garment found its way to Nanny. Neither were Emma Parkins or Anne—now Mrs. Joe Martin—forgotten by the Lassiters.

Sheila had not half finished her delightful rummage when Ned came down to remind her that it was four o'clock, and they must keep their engagement.

'We must come down again in a week or two,' he said, when they had said good-bye to Nanny. 'It would not be a bad idea, Sheila, if we were to run down for a week-end occasionally. Nanny could get a girl from the village to help her. I shall have to see a carpenter about those book-shelves, and I must pick up an oak writing-table to match that bureau. I should like to have the room all ready before we take possession in June.' But what more Edward meant to add was never uttered, for at that moment a little figure appeared in the porch of the Old Cottage, and a small gray dog flew out of the gate, barking furiously at the strangers.

CHAPTER VIII

THE OLD COTTAGE

To Adam paradise was home ; to the good among his descendants home is paradise.—HALL.

‘OH, I am so sorry ! Miss Mowcher, hold your tongue directly. How dare you bark at my friends !’ Betty was apologetic, breathless, radiant as she piloted the Lassiters through the little square hall ; they were her find, her treasure-trove, the captives, so to speak, of her bow and spear. Betty’s voice thrilled with natural pride as she made her introduction. ‘Miss Lassiter, this is my father’ ; and the next moment Sheila was shaking hands with an elderly man, who rose somewhat feebly from his seat.

Sheila said afterwards that Mr. Woodford was a beautiful old man. He had a fine face, though it was somewhat worn, either from trouble or ill-health—probably both ; and that and his snowy hair made him look older than he really was. He had a singularly gentle expression ; it was a good face, though not a strong one, and he was unmistakably a gentleman. A slight nervousness in his manner as he greeted Edward gave them the impression that he was unused to strangers, but it soon passed.

‘My father is rather an invalid,’ observed Miss

Woodford. 'He had an illness some years ago, from which he has not fully recovered ; but this place suits him, and he grows stronger every day. Don't you, dear? Will you take that chair beside him, Mr. Lassiter? He is not deaf, only just a little hard of hearing.' And then Martha moved away to the tea-table, inviting Sheila with a quiet gesture to sit beside her.

The sitting-room they had entered was a long and rather low room, with a window overlooking the front garden and The Moorings. A glass door at the other end opened on a wide verandah and a trim little garden. The furniture was arranged so as to form two separate sitting-rooms. One part was furnished as a study. There was a writing-table in the window, a handsome bureau and bookcase, and a couple of carved oak chairs covered with green morocco—evidently relics of past luxury. The garden end seemed devoted to the daughters' use ; here there were a piano and couch, some easy-chairs, a round table and a few little nicknacks and work-baskets. A spinning-wheel, and an ebony cabinet filled with Chelsea china, and one or two choice engravings, were the chief ornaments. Sheila had never seen a room that was more homelike and to her taste, and she delighted Betty by a quiet word of approval. 'I do so love a room that looks as though it were lived in,' she said ; 'and this is so pleasant and cosy.'

'It is our only sitting-room,' returned Miss Woodford. 'Betty and I do not care for the dining-room except for meals. You see we have devoted the front part to my father's use, and Betty and I do all our work here, as father never likes us to leave him. We are never in his way, and Betty's chatter and songs do not trouble him in the least.'

‘Isn’t it a funny arrangement, Miss Lassiter?’ struck in Betty in her vivacious way. ‘You see we can’t call it either a drawing-room or study—though it is a combination of both—so I have christened this end “The Ingle-nook” and the other “Dad’s Workshop.” In winter we are as snug as possible, and don’t mind close quarters; and in warm weather we have our separate ends of the verandah—our summer parlour, as we call it.’

‘My father reads a good deal,’ explained Miss Woodford; ‘and in the evening he likes us to read aloud or to play chess with him. He is very fond of games. When I am busy Betty often plays cribbage or backgammon with him, as he cannot read by lamplight, and in winter the evenings are so long.’

‘Not that we ever find them so, Marty,’ broke in Betty; ‘they always seem too short to me. Martha reads so beautifully, Miss Lassiter, she makes even a stupid book seem interesting; and when it is anything exciting, one is quite thrilled and gets cold shivers down one’s back, and then I am obliged to work off my feelings by playing a valse.’ Then, ‘No, Mr. Lassiter,’ interrupting herself, as Ned rose from his seat, ‘do please sit down again; I mean to do all the waiting myself. You are far too tall and big for our room. Besides, you frighten Miss Mowcher’; for the wee gray doggie seemed appalled at Mr. Lassiter’s height—Ned’s tall figure seemed gigantic to Miss Mowcher.

Mr. Lassiter remonstrated in vain. Betty would have her way. She fenced him in with a little table, and barricaded him with tea-cups and plates of cake. If Betty did not absolutely dance across the room, she certainly tripped so lightly that she scarcely seemed to

touch the floor. Such airy, breezy movements had never attracted Ned's notice before. Neat-handed Phyllis, Hebe, and Titania were the names that occurred to him as Betty went to and fro, with Miss Mowcher trailing after her like an animated gray door-mat.

'It is such a pleasure for father to have a gentleman with whom he can talk politics,' observed Martha, with a bright look directed towards Mr. Lassiter. 'He sees no one but Mr. Brett and Dr. Moorhouse. We have only lived at Uplands during the last five years; and as my father's weak health has prevented him from making friends, our circle is rather limited. Mr. Brett, our vicar, is very good to him, and often drops in of an evening for a game of chess.'

'My brother is extremely fond of chess,' returned Sheila. 'His literary pursuits allow him so little leisure; but sometimes we indulge in a game after supper, and I am afraid when it is a very exciting game we sit up dreadfully late.'

'Martha, you must ask Mr. Lassiter to come in very, very often,' interrupted Betty. 'It will make father so happy, for neither you nor I play well enough to satisfy him.' Then raising her voice, in spite of Martha's reproving shake of the head, 'You will be kind and neighbourly, will you not, Mr. Lassiter, and play chess often with dear dad?'

'To be sure I will,' returned Ned, with one of his kind looks. 'Little brown Betsy,' as he called her, seemed such a child to him, that he saw nothing at all singular or unconventional in her warm invitation. He was quite willing to join so charming a family circle—only, of course, Sheila must come too, Miss Woodford would be such a nice friend for her—for Ned was quite as unconventional as Betty. Ned had

no idea of Martha's shocked feelings at that moment. He never guessed how hot she grew with shame and annoyance at Betty's forwardness, while Ned beamed at her through his spectacles, quite expecting Miss Woodford to endorse the invitation. Poor Martha turned her head aside, only to meet Sheila's amused and sympathetic glance.

'Don't be afraid,' she said in a low voice; 'neither of us are likely to misunderstand childish impulsiveness and kindness. You do not know my brother, Miss Woodford; he is a most unconventional person; Miss Betty's invitation has simply charmed him. But you need not fear his taking advantage of it. Besides, I give you warning that you will have to ask both of us.'

This was healing, and Martha seemed relieved.

'That is nice of you,' she said gratefully; 'and indeed I hope that we shall be good neighbours. And if only Betty——' but here she checked herself, for, after all, she had no right to inflict her small grievances on a new acquaintance.

Edward Lassiter had spoken the truth when he called Miss Woodford a plain young woman. Her features were undeniably homely; and though her brown hair was very thick and abundant, it was not so glossy and pretty as Sheila's, which Ned once said reminded him of a ripe chestnut in the sunshine; and her complexion was a little sallow and colourless. Nevertheless, people who cared for Martha never could be induced to call her plain.

'There are days when I think her quite beautiful,' remarked one poor invalid whom Martha frequently visited. And another enthusiastic young creature belonging to Miss Woodford's Bible Class declared that she had lovely eyes. 'One can see the angel looking

through them,' she once said, though it must be owned that other people found nothing striking in Martha's hazel eyes.

Ned thought her rather stiff and reserved. Betty's winsome ways—even her 'forwardness'—were far more to his taste. He told Sheila when they left the Cottage that he had quite fallen in love with her little friend.

Sheila was somewhat disappointed at his lukewarm praises of the elder sister. Ned owned that he had hardly spoken half-a-dozen words to her. 'She seems a good sort of person,' he went on, 'very ladylike and pleasant; but she was inclined to be a little down upon Betty. It was "Hush, Betty!" more than once. Not that the little thing took any notice—one might as well try to keep a stray sunbeam or a bit of quicksilver in order. Betty is lady paramount at the Cottage—that old man dotes on her.'

'She is certainly a dear child'—but Sheila spoke absently. Martha Woodford, in spite of her plainness, had attracted her strongly. 'A good sort of person' hardly explained her, and was a trifle chilling. How like a man to pass over Martha's quiet retiring gentleness and avow a preference for a sparkling, childish little creature like Betty! To her Martha seemed the embodiment of restfulness and serenity. Betty was a thing of moods and tenses, and would certainly be fatiguing at times.

'I like old Mr. Woodford,' went on Ned; 'not that he is particularly old either, for he told me that he was only fifty-six. "It is my troubles that have aged me and given me my white hairs"—poor chap, he actually said that. He told me he had lost three children, and that two of them were boys.'

‘How strange that he should have told you that, dear!’

‘Oh, it came quite naturally. He saw me looking at the picture over the mantelpiece. You were noticing it too, Sheila—two boys in Highland dress with a sheep-dog between them.

“They are my boys,” he said so sadly; “they were fine lads too. There was something wrong with the drains—it was an old house—no one suspected it; but diphtheria took them both off, and a little girl as well. It killed their mother.”’

‘Oh dear, how dreadful! I recollect that little Betty telling me that they had lost so many. No wonder his hair is white.’

‘I fancy there has been other trouble too,’ returned Ned. ‘I feel sure that the Woodfords have known better days. That oak bureau and those carved chairs looked quite incongruous in a cottage.’

‘I daresay you are right, dear. Did you notice the cups and saucers?—they are real Wedgwood; and that old Chelsea china in the little cabinet is beautiful. How delightful for us to have such neighbours, Ned, and to be so kindly welcomed by them!’

‘Yes, we are in luck’s way. Did you see the old man’s face, She, when I promised to play innumerable games of chess with him? He was like an old war-horse who scents the battle. He used to be a crack player, he tells me.’

‘So much the better,’ returned Sheila in a delighted tone; ‘there will be no need for you to put up with me now. Mr. Woodford will be an antagonist far more worthy of you.’

And Sheila, with vivid imagination, pictured the Ingle-nook on a winter’s evening. There would be a

lamp on the little round table. She and Miss Woodford would be working by it, and talking in soft undertones. There would be the little chess-table and two absorbed faces opposite. And Betty—ah, Betty would be flitting between them ; now leaning over her father's shoulder to watch the game, now taking up her bit of fancy-work and doing a few stitches. Sheila was so busy with her pleasant fancies that she quite started when Ned made some casual remark. Perhaps their solitary and quiet life had fostered this harmless habit on Sheila's part ; for on dark or gloomy days—when the mending basket was full and Ned busy with his writing—the castle-building went merrily on.

Sheila declared that she was quite worn out with the day's excitement. 'It has been three days rolled in one. Fancy pleasure coming to us in a great lump—how is one to digest it properly?' Ned laughed.

'We will run down again soon for the week-end,' he returned. 'I don't know how you feel, Sheila, but I don't believe I can keep away from that place. I feel inclined to play truant and cut the whole concern. I can no longer say "Blessed be drudgery!" with any semblance of truth.'

'I know what you mean, dear ; but we must be patient a little longer. Mrs. Goulburn has promised to let me free by the middle of May,—only six weeks more of teaching.'

'I mean to shake off the dust of Cottingdean on the 1st of June.' Ned spoke very decidedly. 'I want to see Sleepy Hollow when the gorse is in bloom—when it is a golden world, as your little friend says.' And Ned held his head high as he marched down the hill with seven-leagued boots, humming 'Ye banks and braes' under his breath ; till Sheila, panting

and flushed, begged him to slacken his pace. 'I am just like a broken-winded pony trying to keep up with a race-horse,' she remarked, as Ned, with many apologies, promised to amend his ways.

Meanwhile, the inmates of the Old Cottage were discussing their new neighbours.

'Well, father! well, Marty!' Betty had flown in like a miniature whirlwind, for she had accompanied her friends to the point where Sandy Lane joins the main road. Sheila had refused to let her go a step farther. 'You will catch cold without your hat; besides, even in Uplands, one must attend to *les convenances*'; and Betty, pouting and protesting, had been obliged to retrace her steps, but not before she and Sheila had exchanged a warm kiss. 'Isn't she a dear thing, Marty?'

'Miss Lassiter is certainly very nice,' returned Martha cordially. 'Don't you think she has a sweet face, father?' and Mr. Woodford assented to this.

'A very pleasing person, my dear—a thoroughly ladylike and sensible woman; and her brother is a downright clever fellow. Do you know, Martha, my dear, that he writes for *The Circle*? He is on the staff now. Don't you remember those delightful sketches called "Town and Country," by E. M. L.? Well, they are his initials, Edward Morrell Lassiter.'

'Why, dad, they were just beautiful,' returned Betty before her sister could answer. 'Marty read them to us; and I remember saying that E. M. L. must be a nice man. Not that I am a bit surprised—for, of course, I knew Mr. Lassiter was very clever. He has a learned look like a professor, and you know he does teach in the Cottingdean grammar school.'

'We knew that,' replied Martha; but she spoke in

rather an awed tone. Ned had risen tenfold in her estimation. A literary man had never crossed her path before. The Rev. Luke Brett was an intellectual person, but he sank into comparative insignificance beside this brilliant, versatile writer, whose word-pictures and fine descriptions had often thrilled Martha's soul. She almost gasped with confusion as she remembered how cavalierly Betty had treated him. Her perfect ease, her assurance, her hail-fellow-well-met sort of greeting filled her with dismay. She herself had been too shy to accost him; she had addressed her conversation to his sister. Ned, who was really a harmless individual, looked very formidable in Martha's eyes; he was so tall, so overpowering, and his eyes gleamed through his spectacles in such a penetrating way, that Martha felt quite nervous. If she had only talked to him she would soon have found out her mistake; strange to say, Mr. Woodford was at that very moment scolding Betty in playful fashion for her boldness.

‘Fancy this little chit talking to Mr. Lassiter as though she were his equal’; and here he lightly pinched the pink, shell-like ear that was one of Betty's beauties. ‘She stood up to him like a little bantam strutting before a big cochin-china. I wonder you were not afraid of such a big Fee-fo-fum, a silly little thing like you!’

‘Dad, it is you who are a silly old man!’ exclaimed Betty, indignant at this slight to her intellect. ‘Why should I be afraid of Mr. Lassiter just because he is tall and clever, when he is as nice as possible and has such kind eyes?’

‘My dear Betty!’ and Martha quite blushed.

‘Well, and so he has,’ replied Betty obstinately—

‘nice, affectionate eyes like Peter’s at the vicarage.’ Peter was a small brown dachshund belonging to Mr. Brett. ‘And then he is quite old too.’

‘Do you call a man of three- or four-and-thirty old, my little Betty?’ asked her father in an amused tone. ‘If so, I must be a Methuselah at fifty-six.’

‘No one cares how old one’s father is,’ returned Betty, with a severe hug that nearly took away his breath. ‘Sometimes I call Martha an old maid, and she is not eight-and-twenty yet. Two years and nine months before you are thirty, Marty. Of course, at thirty an unmarried woman must be an old maid.’ But as though to atone for this rather sweeping assertion, Betty graciously added: ‘But never mind, Marty dear, you will be the dearest and sweetest old maid in the world.’

‘With the exception of Miss Lassiter!’ for Martha never took offence at Betty’s childish speeches.

‘With no exception at all’—and there was a world of love in Betty’s brown eyes. Miss Lassiter might be a dear thing—but Martha was simply Martha. And no invidious comparisons could be drawn, ‘for there is no one like a sister’ after all.

CHAPTER IX

MARTHA

For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather ;
To cheer one on the tedious way,
To fetch one if one goes astray,
To lift one if one totters down,
To strengthen whilst one stands.

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

IT was Martha's habit ever since Betty was a child to go to her room the last thing at night and tuck her up ; and if Betty were wakeful and disposed for conversation, she would often linger for a chat. At such moments Betty would be at her best, and Martha would often find an opening for a word in season, which the girl would receive with much docility and meekness.

After their visitors had been fully discussed that evening, Betty had seemed a little restless. She roamed about the garden until it grew quite dusk, and even then was unwilling to settle to any employment. As Martha was reading aloud she curled herself up on the rug with her head against her father's knees. When, later on, Martha asked if she liked the book, Betty confessed that she had not been listening to a word.

'I was just thinking of Mr. Lassiter in his funny

old coat at Mrs. Colville's *musicale*,' she said frankly, 'and how dignified he looked in it. How dreadfully poor they must have been, Marty! I recollect how sorry I was for them. And how I longed to box that horrid Archie Fraser's ears when he said he must be the piano-tuner.'

'That was rather rude of Mr. Fraser; I should have thought he would have been too gentlemanly to make such a remark.'

'Oh, he is rather a nice boy,' acknowledged Betty, and her tone was lenient. 'But I was obliged to snub him a little, and that made him cross. Archie is rather too conceited and cocksure of himself—as Charlie says.'

'Oh, that is Charlie's opinion, is it?' and Martha looked somewhat amused; but Betty took no notice of this remark. 'I am so sleepy that I think I shall go to bed,' she observed. And Betty marched off with much dignity, after bestowing a butterfly kiss on her father's white head. Nevertheless, an hour later, when Martha stole gently into her sister's bedroom with carefully shaded candle, she found Betty lying wide awake and looking out on the moonlight.

Betty looked like a child in her white frills, with her small face almost smothered in hair. The thick curling masses seemed to embower her; and on hot nights she would sit up in bed and coil them on the top of her head; but she never could be induced to plait them. 'I hate plaits,' she would say obstinately; 'I think one's hair feels so nice and comfy when it is all lying over the pillow in curly lumps.'

'I thought you were so sleepy, Bee?' observed Martha, somewhat surprised at her wakefulness. Then she sat down on the bed and stroked the rough brown

mane affectionately. Martha was secretly proud of her little sister's abundant tresses.

'One is never sleepy at the right moment,' observed Betty oracularly. 'Blow out the candle, Marty—the moon is quite light enough—and we can have a prittle-prattle'—a word Betty had often used when she was a child.

'Very well, dear'; for Martha rarely objected on the score of her own sleepiness. A 'prittle-prattle' was seldom carried on in a serious vein; so Martha was almost electrified when Betty suddenly remarked, in a sober voice, 'I am afraid I rather shocked you this evening, Marty.' Martha fairly gasped. Here was Betty taking the bull by the horns—marching with a red flag into the enemy's domain. 'I don't know how it is,' continued Betty with the same marvellous meekness, 'but I always seem to say the wrong thing; the words come tumbling out before I know I am speaking. Of course, it would have been better for you or father to give the invitation to Mr. Lassiter.'

'Yes, darling, I am so glad you see this for yourself.' Martha was enchanted; her refractory pupil had actually learnt her lesson unasked.

'Wait a moment,' Betty's tone grew less meek and more argumentative. 'I quite own that it was your prerogative, Martha; only you were so dreadfully slow, and then my tongue galloped away with me. But there was no need for you to look so shocked; it did not matter, really.'

'But, Betty dear——' but here the girl moved restlessly.

'It is such a stupid world,' she said rather crossly, as she thumped her pillow. 'Of course I understand your view, Marty. I may be like the gray goose in

Jackanapes, but my head is not so small after all. If it had been Archie Fraser now, or any other young man ; but Mr. Lassiter, as if you could be afraid of him !’

Martha was silent. She thought Betty’s forwardness mattered very much indeed ; but, as she often said to herself, it would be a mistake to put ideas in the child’s head. There was something so bewitching in Betty’s innocence and unworldliness ; even her ‘fowardness,’ as Jane called it, was pretty and piquant.

‘You heard what father said, Betty ; Mr. Lassiter is not really old.’ Then Betty thumped her pillow again.

‘If that is yours and father’s opinion, it is not mine,’ she said in rather a dogged tone. ‘He may be the nicest man in the world, but he will always seem old to me. But, Marty dear’—her voice softening—‘I won’t do it again if I can help it. I never can be proper and well-behaved like you ; but you must not be so shy and stand-offish with my friends, dear’ ; and Betty spoke in a wheedling and caressing manner. ‘When you go into your shell like that people have no idea how nice you are, or they would fall in love with you at once.’

‘Oh, you silly child, how can you talk such nonsense !’ and Martha gave her a loving though hasty embrace, and wished her good-night. Her cheeks were rather hot as she went out of the room. Betty’s remark about her shyness somewhat troubled her. Perhaps the child was right, she said to herself ; she was certainly a little slow and unready. She would never have thought of inviting Mr. Lassiter to the Cottage, and yet there was Betty proffering hospitality with the air of a little princess, and Mr. Lassiter looking

as though he liked it. 'I suppose I shall get used to him in time,' thought Martha, 'but I own I was frightened of him this evening; any one so big and clever must be formidable. "You must not be so shy and standoffish with my friends"—fancy the child actually saying that. Well, I must try and get out of my prim, old-maidish ways, if it is only to please my darling Betty.'

Martha Woodford's experience in some respects resembled Sheila's. They had both been brought face to face with the grim realities of life in their youth; but Sheila's troubles had come to her earlier, for until Martha had passed her seventeenth year, her life had been uneventful and singularly happy. A luxurious home, delightful environment, parents whom she revered as well as loved, and a merry household of brothers and sisters—these were some of her blessings. Mr. Woodford was a wealthy merchant, and the Grange—where the children had all been born—with its beautiful gardens and pasture-lands, was charmingly situated in a lovely Kentish village. The property had come into the market owing to the ill fortunes of its late owner, and Mr. Woodford, who had fallen in love with the place, thought it an excellent investment. When Martha knew Sheila better she often talked to her about the dear old home.

'It was such a lovely home,' she said once; 'even strangers who saw it for the first time thought it ideal. You don't know how often I dream of it, and think that I am pacing the terrace again watching Drummond and Willie racing over the lawn with their butterfly nets, and dear little Rosie running after them. I even see our fantail pigeons, the dear things, perching amongst the great chimney-stacks, and the martins

flying in and out of the eaves. I used to wake with tears running down my face, and sob myself to sleep again with home-sickness and longing.'

'How sad for you to leave such a beautiful place,' returned Sheila sympathetically.

'Yes, was it not? and yet not one of us would have lived there a day longer. There was such a fine old hall; part of it was fitted up as a billiard-room, but it was a grand play-room for the boys. There was a gallery at one end, with a small organ, and delightful hidie-holes where the children played hide and seek. And there was the tiger-skin before the fireplace. I remember, when Rosie was a tiny child, she would never pass it alone—the terrible head and gleaming teeth frightened her so. She used to hide her eyes and hold fast to Betty's hand. "He won't bite 'oo, baby dear; he is deaded quite," she would say; but she never lost her fear of the great striped cat, and nothing would induce her to remain alone with it for a moment.'

But, as Martha went on to tell her, the Grange, in spite of its picturesque beauty, was not a healthy abode for children; and one damp, muggy November, when the white mists came climbing up the valley, that terrible and fatal disease diphtheria made sad ravages in the happy household. Drummond was the first to succumb to the malady, but Willie and Rosie soon followed him. Betty lay at death's door for some days, but as soon as she could be moved the distracted parents fled with her and Martha from the house of death. A furnished house was taken at Brighton, and here Mrs. Woodford—always a delicate woman—died, worn out with sorrow, and commended her father and Betty to Martha's care. Martha was only seventeen

then, but she accepted her responsibilities without a murmur, and was a veritable ministering angel to her broken-hearted father.

Mr. Woodford never recovered his wife's death; they had been a singularly united couple. He aged perceptibly, and lost all interest in life. The Grange was let to strangers. Martha only revisited it when she went to pay a pilgrimage to the graves, or 'green gardens,' of her dear ones. They still lived at Brighton. With some difficulty Martha persuaded her father to take a cheerful house at Hove; the sea suited him and Betty. Mr. Woodford was too indifferent to oppose her, but he left her to make all the necessary arrangements. The house was chosen and the furniture arranged without any assistance from him. It was a great responsibility for a girl not eighteen, but Martha had good friends who helped her. Yet, in spite of the cheerful surroundings, it was never a home to any of them. 'I think we all felt that it was only for a time that we should live there,' Martha once remarked to Sheila; 'neither Betty nor I cared much for 18 Shepperton Terrace. It was a good house—the rooms were large and lofty and it was thoroughly comfortable—but somehow it was not home.'

But they had not yet reached the end of their troubles. Martha was nearly three-and-twenty when the final crash came. There were business worries—heavy losses. Martha, who was her father's confidante, had known for the previous eighteen months that he was hampered by financial difficulties. There was a good deal of business depression in the mercantile world just then, and more than one well-established house was on the verge of bankruptcy.

Martha took alarm at once—she was for instant measures. The house was too large and expensive, only a rich man ought to live in it. She urged him to move at once into a smaller one ; but Mr. Woodford would not listen to her for a moment. He was an easy-going, sanguine man, and disliked trouble of any kind. He was proud too, and hated the thought of curtailing his expenses.

‘You are too anxious, Martha, like your namesake in the Bible,’ he said, trying to put a good face on it. ‘This is only an awkward corner ; when we win round it we shall weather the storm. You don’t understand business, my dear,’ he went on ; ‘no woman does. It is our duty to keep up appearances. It would be a great mistake to give up the house ; it would be just giving ourselves away.’

‘But we spend so much money, father. Some of the servants have such exorbitant wages ; Mrs. Drayton was saying so the other day. And then there are the stables. You never use Black Peter now, and Harvey was telling me when he brought the horses round that Peter is just eating his head off and getting fat and lazy. Don’t you think he had better be sold, father ?’

‘Oh, I will see about it when I am a little less busy. Don’t you trouble your head about the stables ; that has always been my province, and your dear mother never interfered.’ Mr. Woodford spoke rather irritably, but Martha took her rebuke in silence. ‘Poor dear old father,’ she said to herself, ‘if only he would have the courage to face things !’ and Martha sighed with a prevision of evil.

Weeks passed and then months, and still Black Peter was in his stall engaged in that mysterious and

impossible employment called 'eating his head off'; and then one day, when they least expected it, the crash came. The house of Woodford Brothers had failed.

Martha never knew all the particulars; but she was well aware that there were fraudulent and disgraceful dealings mixed up with it. Mr. Woodford's hands were clean, his honour unblemished—no man who knew him could distrust his integrity for a moment—but he had been deceived and cheated by a clerk. In some ways Mr. Woodford was an excellent man of business, but since his wife's death he had lost spirit and energy and his natural indolence had increased. He had always been prone to trust people, and no suspicion of his head clerk's nefarious practices had ever entered his head.

'Nicholson is the best man I ever had,' he would say boastingly to his friends. 'I would trust him to carry through any business, however difficult'; and yet it was this very Nicholson who ruined his master.

Mr. Woodford was a weak man—he had never faced any trouble yet—and the blow to his commercial pride was too much for him. That the Woodford name, his father's and grandfather's honoured name, should be bespattered with mud was a terrible thing in his eyes. 'Do well to thyself, and all men shall think well of thee,' had been his life-long motto. Poverty could be borne, but not disgrace.

One morning Mr. Woodford rose, after a sleepless night, to be in time for the early train, when the housemaid, startled by the sound of a heavy fall in the dressing-room, aroused Martha from her sleep. The girl flew down the passage; but the door was locked, and it was some little time before the butler could force his way in. They found Mr. Woodford lying insensible

on the floor—he had had a paralytic stroke. Medical aid was at once procured, but it was some time before he regained even partial consciousness, and for many weeks there was much cause for anxiety. From that day he was a broken man, and only the care and ministrations of his devoted daughters made his life bearable to him.

‘And you had no one to help you?’ asked Sheila, when Martha reached this point in her narrative.

‘There was no one but our dear Mr. and Mrs. Allen,’ returned Martha; ‘they were staying at Brighton for the winter, because Bertha was so delicate. But it is wonderful how one finds help. Mr. Allen is a solicitor in Cottingdean. Betty often stays with them. They are such thoroughly nice people. Mr. Allen was so good. He went into business matters with me, and explained investments, and told me how much we should have to spend. Dear Mrs. Allen was with me every day. Oh, I don’t know what I should have done without them, for Betty was too young to help me. She was only fifteen, and very childish for her age.’

‘It was a sister of Mrs. Allen’s, Mrs. Merrick, who lived then at Uplands, who told us about the Old Cottage, and Mrs. Allen went with me to see it. It seemed a poor little place to me after 18 Shepperton Terrace, and yet I liked it. It was early in May, I remember, and the little common was golden with gorse.’

‘Father was very helpless just then, and he and his nurse and Betty had lodgings in Church Road, near Mrs. Merrick’s, while Jane and I got the cottage ready; but humble as it is, I do not think we have ever repented coming here.’

“What a dear, sweet, cosy little place,” were Betty’s

first words, when I showed her the house. "It is quite a doll's house, and we shall be dreadfully squeezed, but it is far more homelike than Shepperton Terrace." You do not know how thankful I was to hear her say that.'

'And Mr. Woodford?' Then Martha sighed.

'He was very much depressed at first, and I was afraid he would never settle. You see, his nerves had suffered so cruelly from the shock of Nicholson's shameful behaviour and double dealings, that it was months and months before he could recover himself. It used to make me so unhappy to see him sitting in his easy chair just brooding over his troubles; but our good Dr. Moorhouse cheered me up. He told me that in these cases time and patience were needed. "His whole system has sustained a severe shock," he said once; "it is a wonder that he is as well as he is. This fine air, and the perfect quiet and the absence of all anxiety, will be better than any medicine. Get a boy to wheel him out on the golf-links for two or three hours every day, and in the evening play some simple game with him." And Dr. Moorhouse was right. Father seems quite content and happy in his life. Now he seldom speaks of the past; when he does it is only to recall the old happy days at the Grange. When he looks sad we know he is thinking of mother and the boys; but he never troubles about business. I am thankful to say, that he is now as great a reader as ever, and though he has never recovered his walking powers, he manages, with the help of an arm and his stick, to get to a seat on the links on sunny mornings, where he can read his paper and watch the players. Winter is his worst time, but even then Betty and he take what they call their Polar

bear prowl in the verandah ; and sometimes Mrs. Merrick takes him for a drive. Oh, I am far more happy about him now,' finished Martha, in a contented voice ; 'and now he has a new pleasure in your brother's society.'

CHAPTER X

FLORAL MESSAGES

A sweet warm world in the sunlight basking
Under the widespread arch of blue ;
A maze of blossoms the green grass masking,
Fragrant and fresh with the morning dew.

HELEN MARION BURNSIDE.

Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us, or we find it not.—EMERSON.

THE seven or eight weeks which elapsed before the Lassiters took possession of their new home passed rapidly away. Sheila declared afterwards that they were the happiest she had ever known. 'You see we had all the pleasure of anticipation and preparation,' she remarked to Martha. 'We were like children gathering apples in an orchard—our mouths and our pinafores were full, but the fruit was still dangling before our eyes, all ready to be picked. When I pencilled my churchman's almanac at night, I felt like a schoolboy counting up the days before the holidays.'

Ned, indeed, had fits of impatience, and declared that he felt utterly demoralised and unfit for work ; but in reality they were both too busy with their various engagements to have an unoccupied hour.

At the beginning of May they went down to The Moorings for the week-end. As they walked down Sandy Lane in the spring sunshine, the heavy sweet perfume of the gorse was almost overpowering, and the little common was a golden glory. They had a long day of business before them, and it was not until the evening that Sheila proposed calling at the Old Cottage. 'I think it will be only neighbourly,' she said; and Ned assented at once. They found Mr. Woodford and his elder daughter sitting in the verandah. Martha coloured with surprise and pleasure when she saw them, and Mr. Woodford greeted them warmly.

'We had no idea you were at The Moorings,' Martha observed. 'None of us have seen Nanny during the last few days.' And then Ned caught sight of a white sun-bonnet flitting among the gooseberry bushes, and the next minute Betty and Miss Mowcher came flying over the lawn.

'Oh dear, how nice of you to come!' she exclaimed. 'I do love surprises, and it is just splendid to see you again,' with an affectionate glance at Sheila. 'I have been so busy all day working in the garden with Andrew that I never looked across at The Moorings.'

'We have been hard at work too,' returned Sheila; 'but I thought you would forgive this late visit; we have to go back to town by the early train on Monday.'

'But we shall see you to-morrow!' exclaimed Betty, drawing a little wooden stool beside her dear Miss Lassiter. Betty, with her usual heedlessness, was quite oblivious of her own appearance. She looked a quaint, piquant little figure in her sun-bonnet and holland garden apron, with her blue serge dress pinned up to protect it from the mould. She tossed off her sun-bonnet presently and ran her fingers carelessly through

the rough masses of hair. 'I am as grubby as a navvy,' she observed frankly, 'and my hair feels like an old ragged bird's nest; but I know you will excuse it'; and Betty's smile was adorable, though it must be owned that her face and hands bore liberal traces of her work.

'You are a true daughter of the soil,' observed Ned, with a quizzical look through his spectacles. 'I see that Mother Earth has been rather liberal in her gifts to you.'

Then Betty glanced at her feet and the hem of her bespattered petticoat. 'I don't care,' she said defiantly; 'I have done a day's honest work, and Andrew and I have finished the new bed.' Nevertheless, Sheila noticed that a few minutes later Betty slipped away unperceived. She came back presently a renovated Betty, her face rosy from her ablutions and her hair neatly brushed. But Ned, who was in a teasing mood, told her that he was not sure that the sun-bonnet was not more becoming. But Betty only shrugged her shoulders at his badinage.

On this occasion Martha joined naturally in the conversation. She was making an effort to overcome her shyness, and her intelligence and good judgment evidently surprised Ned, and he found himself talking to her with ease and freedom.

'One should never be hasty in one's opinion of people,' he remarked rather penitently when they left the Old Cottage an hour later. 'On our last visit I was not impressed with Miss Woodford; I regarded her as an amiable but somewhat uninteresting young woman. I was too previous—I own it frankly.'

'And you found out your mistake to-night?' Sheila spoke with moderation, but she was secretly charmed.

Martha Woodford had attracted her strongly from the first.

‘Well, you see we had had no talk together; you kept her all to yourself, Sheila, and little Miss Betty fell to my share.’

‘Poor Betty, she was rather neglected this evening.’

‘Not at all,’ returned Ned hastily; for he did not wish to allow that ‘brown Betsy’ had been a little huffy and on her dignity with him. ‘She is only a child,’ he went on—‘a nice, bright-eyed little thing. But her sister has more in her. She has evidently read and thought a great deal. I was very much struck with some of her observations. Really, once or twice I forgot I was not talking to you, Sheila’; and at this compliment Sheila gave a happy little laugh.

Ned could be quite loverlike sometimes in his intense appreciation of his house-mate. No one in Cottingdean who noticed their clever faces and shabby attire knew how this son and daughter of toil clave to each other, and their deep mutual tenderness—silent and undemonstrative as it often was—for life is made up of other things than meat or drink or the wealth that perishes. For, as Marden has beautifully said, ‘we all live on lower levels than we need to do. We linger in the misty and oppressive valleys, when we ought to be climbing the sunlit hills.’ ‘We should count time by heart-throbs,’ says the poet. ‘He most lives who thinks most, feels the noblest, acts the best.’ And from this point of view the life lived in that shabby little house in Brook Street had its elements of grandeur. ‘It was dull and perhaps limited, and there was plenty of scope for self-denial,’ Sheila said afterwards, ‘but as long as we had each other we were not unhappy. Ned had his literary dreams and I had my castle-building.’

Ned had found his visit to the Old Cottage very satisfactory on the whole. He had enjoyed his talk with Miss Woodford and her father, and he had found some pleasure in teasing Betty. But Betty had no mind to be snubbed, even by a literary giant.

‘Mr. Lassiter was not a bit nice to-night,’ she grumbled, when Martha came as usual to bid her good-night. ‘He had no business to laugh at me because I was a little grubby,—and I had been digging all that border; and it was horrid of him to notice my sun-bonnet, and pretend he liked it; and I must have looked like a scarecrow too.’

‘No, only like a busy bee; and indeed, darling,’ returned Martha gently, ‘you looked as nice as possible when you made yourself tidy. Mr. Lassiter was only in fun.’

But Betty, whose womanly *amour propre* had been wounded, was not to be so easily soothed. ‘I do hate to be messy,’ she said crossly. ‘And you were so trim, Marty—not a hair out of order. I think Mr. Lassiter liked talking to you. He has found you out.’ Here Betty’s good-humour returned. ‘You were not a bit stiff with him this evening. You were your own nice, clever self, and I was only silly little Betty,’ and there was a quiver in Betty’s voice. She had no jealousy in her nature, but she had a great idea of her own dignity and an immense respect for a certain Bettina Maud Woodford. ‘For, after all,’ as she once observed, ‘one is always of consequence to oneself—and I am really very fond of myself, and always have been. Don’t you remember when I was a wee thing, Marty, I used to make you hold me up that I might kiss dear little Betty in the glass? I really did love her, you know.’ And Martha had smiled at the

remembrance. What a quaint, sweet thing Betty had been, and she was still as sweet in the elder sister's eyes.

The Lassiters had another jaunt by and by. When Ned had paid the last of his father's debts, he and Sheila went up to town for a day's shopping, and slept at the Metropole for two nights. What a wonderful day that was to Sheila! No little rustic lass just fresh from the country enjoyed her outing with more zest than Sheila did. They went first to St. Paul's Churchyard, and then Ned chose two silk dresses—not only the black that Sheila had set her heart on, but a soft pearly gray that took his fancy; and then they had bought the promised black silk for Eppie.

When Ned went off to the tailor's, Sheila made endless purchases. Ned had strictly enjoined her to have a tailor-made gown such as he had seen the Cottingdean young ladies wear—for, to Sheila's secret astonishment, Ned proved himself rather a close observer of ladies' apparel. 'You have a nice figure, She, and you will look as well as any of them. Miss Woodford seems to dress very nicely.' But Ned was ignorant, as he made this patronising remark, that Martha's clever fingers made her own and Betty's frocks. As they sat at their little table at *table d'hôte* that night, almost screened by the tall palm that overshadowed them, while Sheila, tired but happy, ate her dinner and looked at the smart groups around her, Ned said suddenly, with much *naïveté*—

'I had no idea spending money was so pleasant, She. I don't know when I have enjoyed a day more. I won't go so far as to say that "the soul of this man is his clothes," but I own that the thought of those three suits of decently-cut garments is a satisfaction to me.' And here Ned helped himself to another glass of hock.

‘What *drôles* these English are,’ observed a young Parisian lady to her companion. ‘Did you see that tall lamp-post of a man and that shabby young woman with him? She had rather a nice face, Victor. I should think she is his wife.’ But the stout Frenchman only shrugged his shoulders as he devoted his attention to mixing his salad.

‘You have the imagination, *mon amie*,’ he replied after an interval. ‘How is one to find out such things? He has the air of a professor, but his clothes make one shudder. If I looked long at him, I should have an indigestion.’

‘Oh, but they seem so happy,’ the little Frenchwoman replied wistfully; ‘they have the laugh of children. What does it matter that their clothes are shabby? they are gay and tranquil. See, they are going. *Ciel!* what a tower of a man’—in an undertone as Ned passed her. Then Madame’s expression changed. She jumped up from her chair with an exclamation and pounced upon the pocket-book that Ned had left behind him. Madame was small and nimble—she soon overtook them.

‘A thousand pardons! Monsieur has left this beside his serviette,’ she said breathlessly.

‘Oh yes, it is my brother’s. I am so much obliged to you’; and Sheila smiled gratefully.

‘She has lovely eyes,’ muttered Madame; ‘they are gray and soft as a dove’s wing. So it is her brother! Oh, but they are *drôle* these English!’ as she returned to her seat.

Ned and Sheila were hurrying off to the theatre. They were to see Wyndham in *David Garrick*, and for the rest of the evening Sheila laughed and wept, and was entranced and thrilled by the wonderful

pathos and passion of that marvellous performance. Ned took his pleasure more coolly.

They spent the greater part of Sunday at Westminster Abbey, and between the services they walked over Westminster Bridge and along the Embankment; and in the evening they strolled there again, listening to the church bells and watching the golden reflections in the river and the red glare of the sunset; two wonderful days to be treasured up in Sheila's memory.

The last day at Brook Street came on them almost suddenly. Sheila was surprised at the little pang of regret that crossed her as Ned closed the door behind him. But Kaiser, who was seldom taken out for a walk at this hour, almost lost his head with excitement, and rushed round them barking with glee, and every now and then jumping up against Euphemia, who was carrying a covered basket wherein 'the Orphan' lay licking buttered paws and mewling piteously.

'Down, you great gawk,' remonstrated Eppie, 'or you will drive me dottle, leaping on me in that fashion. Aye, but the puir beast is in an awful feery-farry, Miss Sheila. And nae wonder'—under her breath—'when our world is turned upside down.' But Eppie was a proud woman that day, for in her box there lay folded between silver paper the shining folds of that marvellous silk dress, and on the top a cashmere mantle that Sheila had brought from town and presented to her old nurse.

'Your cloak is so shabby, Eppie dear,' she said, 'and you have grown such a miser and spend so little on yourself.' Then the old woman regarded the mantle with admiring eyes.

'It is ower fine for me, my doo,' she said at last.

‘Oh, it is just grand—and it comes from London too!’ And Eppie fairly gloated over her treasure.

Martha had recommended a young housemaid to the Lassiters. She was a member of Martha’s Bible Class, and had just left an unsatisfactory situation. Some correspondence had passed on the subject between Miss Woodford and Sheila.

‘Ruth is a thoroughly nice girl,’ wrote Martha; ‘but she is very pretty, and her stepmother is an injudicious woman, and she needs gentle and firm management. When she cares for any one she is easily guided. I have never had any trouble with her, and she has ever been a great favourite with me. But her last mistress did not understand Ruth, and was always finding fault with her.’

Sheila thought she could not do better than engage Martha’s *protégé*. The girl was strong and willing, and Eppie would be good to her.

It was Ruth who opened the door to them when they arrived at The Moorings that bright June morning—a pretty, dark-eyed girl, who glanced at her new mistress anxiously, until Sheila smiled at her. As Ned followed his sister into the house neither of them saw a girl, with a white sun-bonnet tilted over her eyes, running round the side of the house and then suddenly vanishing through the gate. But she left plentiful tokens of her presence.

‘I think the fairies must have been at work,’ observed Ned as he looked round the sitting-room; ‘or is it your new handmaid, Sheila?’ But Ruth, who was following them, overheard the question.

‘It was Miss Betty, sir; she has been hard at work since the early morning. She said she wanted you and my mistress to have a welcome.’

Betty must have risen betimes, Sheila thought, to fill all those flower-vases. Not only had she robbed their little garden, but she had scoured the woods and hedgerows, and brought in trophies from moor and marsh — syringa and guelder roses, pink and white hawthorn, and choice specimens from the flower-borders at the Old Cottage, and wild-flowers of every description.

Betty had roamed for miles the previous day, filling her basket with bright red pimpernels and ragged robin, the green-winged orchis that flowers in early summer, myosotis and lady's smock, bedstraw and wild raspberry. Betty, who had a genius for arranging flowers, did marvels. Sheila's sitting-room and bedroom were transformed into bowers, and even Ned's study had its modest bouquet.

'Isn't it sweet of her!' exclaimed Sheila; but her eyes were a little misty as she spoke, for she was touched as well as pleased.

When Kaiser had been introduced to his new home, and had hunted visionary cats in the kitchen-garden, and had barked himself hoarse, and the long-suffering 'Orphan' had been released from durance vile, Sheila went across to the Old Cottage. Both the sisters came out into the porch to greet her. Betty blushed with delight as Sheila praised the floral decorations.

'No one arranges flowers as Bee does,' observed Martha; 'she is the vicar's chief helper at all our grand festivals. I always enjoy seeing Betty arrange flowers; she just touches them and they seem to fall naturally into their place. And then she has such an eye for colour; and yet her contrasts are very daring sometimes.'

'I put a wee bunch into Mr. Lassiter's room,' whispered Betty confidentially. 'I was just a teeny

weeny bit cross with him that night because he teased me, so I thought I should like to make up for it.' And Sheila, with much amusement, repeated this speech to Ned.

When Ned saw Betty a few hours later he looked very kindly at the little girl.

'So it is pax is it, Miss Betty, and we are friends again? I think the pimpernels brought me that message?' Then Betty seemed a little confused.

'I was tired, and I expect that made me cross,' she said quite frankly. 'I don't really mind your laughing at me a bit; I am always laughing at myself. I thought I had been a little touchy and rude, and I wanted you to have a nice welcome; and it was not fair that your sister should have all the flowers.'

'Thank you,' returned Ned simply. He held out his hand and gave hers a warm grasp. What a child she was! And yet it was a pretty thought.

When Ned wished his sister good-night he put his hands on her shoulders for a moment.

'Well, are you happy, She?'

But as Sheila raised her soft eyes to his he needed no answer.

'To-morrow,' she said quietly, 'will be the first day of our new life. God grant it may be a peaceful and happy one to both of us!'

And Ned murmured 'Amen' from the bottom of his heart.

CHAPTER XI

‘I HAVE THE SOUL OF A CHARWOMAN’

She was such an artless little creature, and was in such a sunny, beaming, hopeful state.—DICKENS.

She had great sense, but the playfulness of a child ; extreme rectitude of mind, but with the tenderness of a gazelle ; if she laughed, all her countenance, lips, eyes, forehead, cheeks laughed too.—BULWER.

THE Lassiters very soon settled down in their new home.

‘It is astonishing how quickly one adapts oneself to new conditions and environment,’ Sheila observed one morning, while she and Ned were lingering over their breakfast. Those social, unhurried meals were among their new pleasures. ‘We are conjugating the verb “to dawdle” for the first time in our life,’ she continued ; and then she added, after a moment of apparently blissful reflection, ‘Isn’t it strange how one gets used to happiness ? I feel as though I had lived here all my life’ ; and yet when Sheila uttered this paradox, a week had not yet elapsed since they had shaken off the dust of Cottingdean.

Sheila had been too busy to see much of the inmates of the Old Cottage. ‘Her playtime had not come yet,’ she said laughingly.

Martha had too much tact and good sense to

embarrass the new-comers with officious offers of help. 'If you need any little service, I hope you will remember that you have neighbours,' she had said to Sheila that first evening; and Sheila had thanked her quite gratefully.

Betty had not spoken, but she looked at her friend a little wistfully. Betty was rather chagrined to find that there was no demand for her willing hands at The Moorings. If Sheila had held up her finger, Betty would have verified her pet name and worked like a little busy bee. But in those sweet early days, when Sheila opened her eyes each morning on a new world, she and Ned were all-sufficient to each other.

When Ned was not on the golf-links striding over the bracken and heather, he was hard at work arranging his study. With a man's short-sightedness and want of judgment, he would entreat Sheila to bring up her work and sit by the window while he arranged his book-shelves and writing-table. 'I can work as we talk,' he said quite condescendingly; but Sheila only laughed in his face and flicked her duster at him.

Sheila and Eppie had their own domain of labour. There were store implements to investigate and china and linen closets to overhaul and rearrange. Eppie's eyes were wide with wonder and surprise as Sheila brought some new treasure to light.

'It caws a', she would mutter. '"If riches increase, set not your heart on them," that's what the Guid Book says, Miss Sheila. We must watch over ourselves, lest we be eaten up with pride and vanity and the lust of life.'

Sheila repeated this speech with much amusement, when one evening she came upon Betty in the lane. 'It was a pair of brocaded silk curtains—very old,

but still as good as possible—that provoked the speech, “the lust of life tapestry,” as I call them.’ Then out of sheer kindness of heart, or in answer to the vague wistfulness in the girl’s eyes, Sheila gave her a cordial invitation for the next day.

‘I am going to fit up a new china cupboard, the old one is so dark ; and if you would like to come and help me——’ But Betty hardly let her finish her speech.

‘I should love it above all things,’ she returned rapturously. ‘I am just dying to be busy. I really believe that if father had been a carpenter, or plumber, or something of that sort, instead of a merchant, I should just have gone out charing. I think charing must be such a delightful occupation, Miss Lassiter,’ went on Betty, with the bewitching smile of a blissful infant. She had a basket of eggs in one hand and a tin pail in the other, and she wore a red Tam-o’-Shanter cap set rather rakishly on her curly hair. ‘It must be so nice to take possession of somebody else’s house, and trundle the furniture about, and make a mess and splash and clean to one’s heart’s content. I have the soul of a charwoman, I have indeed, and I would do a day’s work with any one.’

Sheila found out the next day that this was no idle boast on Betty’s part ; the small brown hands were very strong and capable. ‘She was worth two Ruths,’ Sheila acknowledged afterwards. ‘She has the cleverest little head, and was brimful of ideas, and she hummed over her work like a veritable busy bee.’

Betty was quite in her element. This was what she wanted—to have a finger in The Moorings’ pie. Sometimes, when she paused for a moment, she could hear Mr. Lassiter whistling or trolling out snatches of song

in rather a deep, melodious voice. At intervals he would call over the banisters for 'She' to come up instantly and look at some improvements.

Once Sheila turned restive. She was perched on the high steps, putting away sets of superfluous custard glasses and decanters and other heterogeneous articles on the top shelf of the glass cupboard, and was unwilling to break off her employment; and half in fun, and to teach Ned a lesson for the future, she sent Betty up to the study to tell him that she was busy.

'Ruth can go on handing me the things until you come back,' she said quietly.

Betty needed no second invitation. Ned, who was in his shirt-sleeves, was somewhat startled at her entrance.

'I thought it was my sister,' he said rather lamely. Betty saw at once he was not quite pleased to see her.

'Miss Lassiter is busy,' returned Betty with much dignity. 'She sent me up to say so. When a person is standing on the top of high steps, with her head in a china closet, it is not very considerate to ask her to come down.' Betty's voice was distinctly aggressive.

Ned whistled. 'Poor old She,—I had no idea she was so busy. Well, as you are here, Miss Bettina, you may as well be kind enough to give me your opinion. Do you think this end of the room looks a little crowded?'

'Yes, I do,' returned Betty quickly; and without waiting for Ned's permission, she pounced on a superfluous article of furniture and dragged it away, while he watched her with much astonishment. 'If you were a cripple or a very old man, you might want everything round you, because you could not get up to fetch it; but it is not the least necessary just yet, and

only fosters self-indulgence'—here Betty looked at him sternly. 'You have got the little stand for your pipes and the reading-lamp and writing-table, but that whatnot with its litter of papers must go to the other end.'

'Oh, do you think so?' returned Ned doubtfully. He was certainly getting into fussy old bachelor ways. 'If Sheila were here——' But Betty was not going to put up with shilly-shallying and nonsense; she knew she was right, and that Ned was destroying a charming corner.

'If you will just help me carry this thing across the room,' she replied, 'I will show you what I mean; but it is so heavy with all those books and papers that I can't do it alone. You see,' explained Betty cheerfully, 'even a charwoman needs help sometimes.'

Ned laughed. He could not help it. What a ridiculous child it was! Then he asked mischievously—

'Have you dressed for the character, Miss Bettina, or has Eppie lent you that apron?'

'No indeed, it is my very own!' returned Betty indignantly. 'I could never keep myself nice without a regular charwoman's apron.' As the storeroom was draughty, Betty still wore her Tam-o'-Shanter cap and a little red shawl that Eppie had offered her. No one could accuse Betty of vanity and coquetry in her charing costume, and Ned might be forgiven for the secret amusement that prompted the question; but Betty was too much in earnest to resent his impertinence properly.

Here were pastures new—a space of masculine territory evidently given into the hands of a Philistine. Mr. Lassiter might be a learned professor, but in the arrangement of furniture he was lamentably deficient

in taste ; it would only be kind and neighbourly to rectify his mistakes. 'It was all in the day's charing,' thought Betty, as she arranged and ordered, pushing a chair here and a table there, until Ned's private and particular sanctum was quite transformed into a comfortable and orderly study.

'There, doesn't it look nice!' exclaimed Betty, flushed but radiant. 'Sit down in that chair, Mr. Lassiter. Isn't your corner far more comfortable?' And in sheer honesty and gratitude Ned was forced to agree with her.

It was at this supreme moment that Sheila discovered them. For a time she had been too busy to miss her fellow-worker ; the top shelf demanded all her attention, for it was not easy to stow away all that surplus glass. It was not until her job was accomplished that Sheila descended from her perch to seek for the truant. She gave a nod of approval when she saw the alteration.

'Bravo!' she said ; 'you have made Ned do the very thing I wanted him to do yesterday. I told him again and again that that ugly whatnot with his papers quite spoiled his corner, but he absolutely refused to listen to me. You know, Ned, you were as obstinate as possible.'

'Oh, men are always obstinate,' returned Betty calmly ; 'and then they are so dreadfully opinionated that it is waste of words to argue with them. I just made him carry the ugly thing to that nice corner where the curtain will hide it—and he did it like a lamb.' Betty spoke with spirit ; in her excitement she had pushed her Tam - o' - Shanter until it was more rakish than ever ; but the little red shawl draped the study chair, where Betty had flung it half an hour ago.

‘It really looks very nice, Ned, and is a great improvement,’ observed Sheila in a tone of full conviction. ‘That corner by the window is deliciously cosy.’

‘I was just thinking so myself,’ returned her brother; ‘but if Miss Bettina were to try the effect——’ But Betty shook her head.

‘No, thanks, I am far too busy. Come, Miss Lassiter, we will leave the professor in peace’; and Betty nodded to him in a friendly manner as she withdrew.

Ned followed them to the door. ‘I rather approve of your new charwoman, Sheila,’ he said gravely. ‘She seems rather a clever young person, though perhaps a little wanting in humility. Somehow the virtue does not seem to belong to the age.’ He sighed as though oppressed with the shortcomings of the younger generation, and then went back to his corner to smoke a matutinal pipe and admire his room under its new aspect.

After dinner Ned announced his intention of going out. ‘Supposing we all spend the afternoon on the links,’ he suggested. But Sheila, who was tired with her exertions, shook her head.

‘You had better have your ramble alone,’ she replied; ‘there is some needlework that I must finish. I was going to suggest that we should carry out some chairs and that little rustic table and sit under the firs. We might have tea there if Betty liked. For Betty had insisted that very morning that Sheila should dispense with ceremony and call her Betty.’

‘But your name is Bettina,’ objected Sheila. ‘I notice Ned calls you that.’

‘Oh, I daresay,’ returned Betty indifferently; ‘he is a gentleman, so it does not matter. But I hate the

name, and I won't have you use it. I am plain Betty. No one calls me Bee but Martha—it is her own special and particular name.

Betty was a little disappointed at Miss Lassiter's decision, but she was an amiable little soul and easily accommodated herself to circumstances. Their encampment was soon formed, and before half-an-hour was over Betty was chattering nineteen to the dozen.

Sheila's work dropped to her lap as she leaned back in her chair, while the soft June breezes fanned her face. She was very tired, with that pleasant feeling of fatigue that follows hours of honest labours. How sweet and still it was under the firs! There was a scent of roses from the low straggling bushes in the bed before the house; through the white gate there were glimpses of the common—a veritable Sleepy Hollow it was this afternoon, for the bees and the butterflies had it all to themselves. 'I think I shall sit here every afternoon,' she observed. 'I like it better than the tennis-lawn. Ned means to have a hammock or two slung—it is a fancy of his. Do you know, Betty, when I have got the house in order, I must turn my attention to the garden; it has been dreadfully neglected.'

'Mrs. Hartree was so very old, you see,' returned Betty. 'During the last year or two she never came downstairs. Martha or I used to go and see her every day. Did you know she left us each five hundred pounds—because she said we had been so kind to her?'

'Yes, Ned told me; we were both so pleased.'

'Martha thought we had no right to take it when she found that Mrs. Hartree had relations,' went on Betty; 'but Mr. Roffey soon talked her round. And of course the money will be extremely useful. Martha

is such a splendid manager, no one who knows us has an idea how poor we really are. And yet we are as comfortable as possible.'

'I do not think you were as poor as we were, Betty.'

'Well, perhaps not,' as a vivid remembrance of Mr. Lassiter's coat crossed Betty's mind; 'but it was not always easy for Martha to make ends meet. She never liked to trouble me with her worries, but as she sat over her accounts of an evening her dear face would look quite lined with care; so you may think what Mrs. Hartree's legacy meant to us.'

'I am so very glad,' repeated Sheila. She listened with unfeigned interest as Betty launched forth on the merits and perfections of this dearest of sisters.

'Oh, you do not know'—Betty spoke in a fervid tone—'you would never guess what Martha is to us. I never knew any one half so good and unselfish. She never seems to think of herself at all; it has always been so all her life. But you would never find it out for yourself, Martha is so quiet.'

'Quiet people always attract me,' replied Sheila, taking up her work again. 'People are a little like books, I think. I know there are some who prefer large print and wide margins; they like their reading made easy to them, and to plunge into the middle of a story at once. But I like a smaller print and plenty of matter, and not to know the end too quickly. And so with people; I like to find them out by degrees—it is so much more interesting.'

'Oh, what a funny idea!' laughed Betty; 'I wish Marty could hear that.'

'Now your sister interested me at once,' continued Sheila, too much interested in her subject to find out

if Betty's girlish wits were following her ; ' I never felt so drawn to any one. I have not seen her half-a-dozen times, and yet if I were in any trouble I should go to her at once and feel sure of her help and sympathy ' ; but before Sheila could finish her sentence, the impetuous Betty jumped up and gave her a hug.

' Oh, how sweet of you to say that ! ' returned the girl. ' I love you all the better for caring for my dear Marty.' And then the warm-hearted little creature narrated touching little instances of her sister's self-denial and generosity. How she had worn her shabby old cloak another winter, that Betty might have the new dress she coveted ; and how she had stinted herself of all but absolute necessities, that her young sister should have all she needed for her visit to Cottingdean.

' Martha knew how I longed to go, and there was so little money just then,' continued Betty. ' Of course I offered to give it up ; but no, Marty said it could be managed. But I have no idea where she got the money for my new jacket and the soft white silk for the dance the Allens were giving before Charlie went away.' Betty flushed and dimpled a little over this part of her narrative.

' Charlie,' observed Sheila absently. She was following the movements of ' the Orphan,' who was playing in a kittenish fashion with a reel of cotton at her feet, and so she failed to notice the little girl's blush.

' Charlie is the third son,' explained Betty hurriedly. ' He is an engineer, and has just gone out to West Africa. He had rather a good berth offered him. Vernon, the eldest son, is with his father—Mr. Allen is a solicitor, you know—and Stuart is at Oxford. He wants to be a schoolmaster. Grace comes next to

Vernon, she is such a nice girl ; and Katie, my special crony, is a year younger than Charlie. Bertha comes next, and then there is Peter. He is at the grammar school, but he is so clever that they all say that he will get a scholarship and go to Oxford too.'

'I know the Allens' house,' returned Sheila, in a tone of sympathetic interest. 'I used to pass it on my way to the Goulburn's. Sometimes I would meet your friend Katie—what a pretty girl she is!—and one or other of her brothers. They are all good-looking young fellows,' went on Sheila, 'but there was one I specially noticed. He is not tall, but he has a strong, athletic figure, and his face is tanned almost like a sailor's, and he has merry blue eyes and a nice laugh, and I remember I took quite a fancy to him, and called him "my sailor boy" when I mentioned him to Ned.'

'That must have been Charlie,' returned Betty rather quietly, but something in her tone made Sheila look at her. The next moment she smiled and changed the subject.

CHAPTER XII

THE VICAR OF ST. JUDE'S

The world has nothing to bestow,
From our own selves our bliss must flow.
COTTON.

Cheerful people live long in our memory.—MARDEN.

A FEW minutes later an interruption occurred which put a stop to the conversation ; the green gate was unlatched and flung open, and Mr. Lassiter's tall figure appeared in sight, followed by a gentleman in clerical attire. Sheila recognised at once the stern, ascetic-looking face of the vicar of St. Jude's, and, as before, she was struck with his commanding and aristocratic bearing. 'There is something almost majestic in his carriage,' she said afterwards ; 'and though he is so quiet in voice and manner, he gives one the impression of a strong and intense nature kept in check.'

'Mr. Brett wishes to make your acquaintance, Sheila,' observed her brother. 'He was a constant visitor at The Moorings during Aunt Sarah's lifetime.'

'Mrs. Hartree was a great friend of mine,' returned the vicar, shaking hands cordially with Sheila. His smile was exceedingly pleasant and lighted up his face, making it look younger.

'I introduced myself to Mr. Lassiter on the links,

when I came upon him with Mr. Woodford and his daughter. Ah, Miss Betty, I did not see you for the moment. Where is your volatile friend ?'

'I am doing a day's charing, Mr. Brett,' returned Betty with dignity, 'so I left her with Jane. Kaiser is so big that I was afraid he might eat up my darling Miss Mowcher.'

'You need not be afraid of that, Miss Bettina,' interposed Ned. 'Kaiser is always chivalrous to ladies, and he never fights with any dog that is not of his own size ; and to do him justice, he is never the aggressor.'

'He is a magnificent fellow,' observed Mr. Brett, as he took the seat assigned to him. Ruth was just bringing out the tea-things. As he leant back in his hammock chair, Sheila saw at once that he was much fatigued, and there was an air of lassitude about him that contrasted strangely with his fine physique. 'I have a great fancy for collies,' he went on, 'and would willingly be the owner of one ; but, owing to circumstances, I have a four-legged companion who would die of jealousy if I introduced another dog. He is a small dachshund who followed me home one winter's evening and who was never claimed, though I advertised more than once in the local paper. He had a handsome collar with "Peter" on it, and was evidently a well-bred animal.'

'And you kept him ?' Then again a smile came to Mr. Brett's dark face.

'How was one to refuse hospitality to a homeless stranger on such a night, Miss Lassiter ? The poor little animal was in sorry plight between cold and hunger and fright. I heard something pattering behind me in the darkness, and as I stopped a little dachshund fawned on me and whined. We had him dried and fed, and after

that he refused to leave me. His devotion is almost embarrassing at times. My aunt and the servants tell me that when I go out without him—which I have to do continually, as his short legs cannot keep up with mine—he just lies in my study and moans, unless they give him a glove or slipper that belongs to me, and then he is pacified. But when I come back he rejoices over me as though I had been absent for months.'

'Peter is a dear dog,' observed Betty; 'I don't think I ever saw any creature so devoted to his master. I think, if anything happened to you, Mr. Brett, he would die of grief.'

'I am afraid you are right,' returned the vicar. 'There is something mysterious in the affection of our canine friends. They are not only the patient slaves of our whims, but they depend upon us for happiness. They respond to our moods, and our depression reacts on them. Peter knows at once when anything is troubling me, and tries to sympathise in his dumb way.'

'Kaiser is just the same,' observed Sheila. And then, as they all grouped round the little tea-table, first one and then another recalled amusing or pathetic anecdotes of their special pets; and Mr. Brett, who seemed a dog-lover, related stories of sagacity and heroism that he had heard or read. Presently the conversation veered round to the late owner of the house.

'This is a very pleasant retreat on a summer's afternoon,' observed Mr. Brett. 'Do you know, Miss Lassiter, that though I was at The Moorings three or four times a week, I have never sat in the garden before? Like many other old ladies of the past generation, Mrs. Hartree seemed afraid of air.'

‘They did not understand hygiene in those days,’ remarked Ned.

‘I am so glad our poor old aunt had such kind friends and neighbours,’ observed Sheila, with one of her beaming looks.

‘As far as friends were concerned, Mrs. Hartree was not lonely,’ returned Mr. Brett; ‘the Woodfords and my aunt were constant visitors, and during the last two or three years of her life I saw her almost daily. But until a twelvemonth ago we had no idea that she had relatives living.’

‘There was a misunderstanding with my father,’ explained Ned. ‘I do not deny that he was greatly in fault, but my aunt never forgave him, and refused to have anything to do with us. You may judge my amazement and incredulity when I heard from Messrs. Roffey and Williams that she had left me everything.’

‘No, not everything,’ corrected the vicar; ‘there was a favourite charity or two largely endowed’; but Mr. Brett said nothing more.

Ned and Sheila little guessed that they owed their unexpected windfall to the tact and persuasive eloquence of the vicar. A twelvemonth before, when Mrs. Hartree was consulting him about some institution for the blind which she intended to include in her list of legacies, Luke Brett gathered from a remark which she made casually, that she had actually relatives living. His surprise was great, but he answered her firmly and quietly.

‘The institution you have named is an excellent one, but if you have great-nephews and a niece surviving, your money should go to them, especially as you hint that they are not in good circumstances.’

This plain speaking had offended Mrs. Hartree, and she had been so angry at what she termed his interference, that he had taken his leave ; but she was old and ill, and after a time a reconciliation was effected ; but both he and his aunt, Miss Lorimer, with whom he had taken counsel, spoke very seriously to the aged invalid of her injustice to her own flesh and blood. More than once Luke Brett was quite stern with her.

‘ You have no right to endow charitable institutions and defraud your own flesh and blood. Do you think your money will carry a blessing with it ? You tell me that your nephew, Julian Lassiter, repaid your kindness with ingratitude. Well, he is no longer here to answer for his sins—at least his children are innocent of all wrong towards you.’

Then Mrs. Hartree had been silent. Her lonely old age had embittered her, and she had brooded over injuries real or imaginary until the name of Lassiter had grown hateful to her. Even when the vicar’s eloquence prevailed, and a more just will had been signed and witnessed, Mrs. Hartree refused to see her heir. ‘ No, no,’ she said, with the fretful selfishness of old age, ‘ I am too old and weak to see new faces, and Edward Lassiter is a stranger to me’ ; and so great was her agitation that Mr. Brett forbore pressing her on this point.

Little did Sheila and her brother guess that they owed their present prosperity to the faithfulness of the vicar of St. Jude’s ; but they were never likely to hear it from his lips, and there was no significance in manner or tone to lead them to suspect the truth.

When Ned again alluded regretfully to the life-long estrangement, Mr. Brett quietly endorsed his words.

‘ A family misunderstanding is always to be deplored,’ he observed ; ‘ nothing can be sadder than a lonely old

age. "To err is human, to forgive divine." Mrs. Hartree was in many respects a good woman—she was a kind mistress, a loyal friend, and she was very benevolent—but she could not forgive easily, and so by her own act she condemned herself to loneliness. It is sad to think how we ourselves sow the thorns and briars that are eventually to hedge us up.'

Sheila looked a little thoughtful; it distressed her to think that the kindly folk of Uplands might imagine that she and Ned were to blame. 'If Aunt Sarah had been poor it would have been easier for us to make overtures, but in our position——' she stopped, but Mr. Brett comprehended her at once.

'There were difficulties—one understands that. Mrs. Hartree's nature was complex and peculiar; any advances on your part would probably have been misunderstood. Well, I am only glad that the right thing was done at last, and you are so comfortably established at The Moorings. Now I must be going or Peter will be moaning his heart out and thinking I am lost indeed.'

'I have to go to the village, so I may as well walk up with you,' observed Ned, who was unwilling to part with a congenial companion.

On his return he found Sheila still waiting. Betty had just left her, but she was not sorry to be alone a little. She had pleasant thoughts to keep her company; for once in her life no castle-building was necessary to gild a meagre, unsatisfactory present with the rainbow gold of glittering fancies. They were at their moorings, peacefully anchored in a still back-water; and as Sheila looked out on the little common, where some children were playing, her soul swelled with a sense of deep gratitude. 'It will give Ned back his youth,' she thought, as she recalled the animation of his

look and manner. 'He was far too old and staid for his age; I was always telling him so, but there was no scope for him in Brook Street.'

She roused herself from her reflections when Ned threw himself into a seat beside her. 'Well, She, what do you think of the vicar? He seems disposed to be friendly and pleasant. That was a good idea of yours having tea under the firs.'

'I was just telling Betty that I always intended to have afternoon tea in the fir parlour when you gentlemen marched in. I think our first tea-party was quite a success. But I wanted Miss Woodford to be with us—that would have made it perfect. So you were with them on the links, Ned?'

'Yes; Mr. Woodford was in his bath-chair, and I walked beside him as far as the Dene, and then we came upon Mr. Brett. He had been calling there, I think. He was exceedingly cordial in his manner, and when we left the Woodfords he proposed that he should pay his respects to you. Well, Sheila, you have not answered my question. I hope you like Mr. Brett?'

'How could one help it?' returned Sheila; 'he is so very kind and friendly. But, to own the truth, I felt rather in awe of him; at first sight he is rather a formidable individual, he is so exceedingly dignified.'

'I expect that is natural to him—mere mannerism. You have no idea how unaffected and jolly he was on the links. But then you see the Woodfords were old friends, and he seemed thoroughly in touch with them. He is very enthusiastic about his work, and, like myself, he is a book-lover. He wants me to go round and have a chat with him some evening. He was immensely interested to know that I wrote for the *Circle*. I fancy

from his manner that he dabbles in literature himself, though he would not own to it.'

'I should not be surprised ; I am sure he is a clever man. But he seemed very tired, Ned.'

'Oh, you noticed that ; but it is a warm afternoon, and it is rather a long walk to the Dene. I felt rather lazy myself. This strong air bowls one over at first. Mr. Brett says that we shall soon become acclimatised.'

They talked on happily about their new acquaintance until the supper-bell roused them, and then Sheila jumped up in a hurry to put away her work.

The next morning, as she was arranging some flowers in the drawing-room, she heard the click of the gate, and saw an old lady tripping up the garden path. She was such a picturesque little figure, and was dressed in such a quaint, old-world fashion that Sheila was instantly attracted by her. As she went out into the hall she was greeted by a cheery voice, with just a touch of brogue in it, and a fine old face beamed on her from under the Victorian bonnet.

'You are Miss Lassiter are you not, my dear ? Of course, I should have known you anywhere from Luke's description,—not that he said much. Well, I am Miss Gillian ; that is what folk mostly call me, though my father's name was Lorimer. He was an Englishman, and my mother was Irish. So I am a bit of a Paddy, you see, and I have kissed the blarney stone with the best of them. I am paying you an early visit, because I am not a conventional person, and never do things by rule of thumb. And I have brought you these flowers'—thrusting out a huge bunch of roses and lilies and pinks that scented the place with their fragrance.

'Are they for me ? How very kind !' and Sheila

blushed with surprise and pleasure. 'Do please come into the drawing-room, Miss Lorimer.' But to her amusement Miss Gillian shook her head, and sat down on the oak settle by the open door.

'I hate drawing-rooms, my dear, especially on summer mornings—they are so exceedingly stuffy. Why should we not sit here and have our little chat?' Here Miss Gillian looked at her critically and approvingly. 'What a remarkable thing it is that even a clever, sensible man like Luke should be so bald in his descriptions.

"Now, my good lad," I said to him; for he will always be a lad to me—for have I not tucked him up in his cot, night after night, when his blessed mother was too weak to look after him herself?—"just tell me what sort of a person Miss Lassiter is."

'Oh, if you please, Miss Lorimer——' Sheila's cheeks were beginning to burn at the old lady's frankness. What might she not say next?

'You'll find Miss Gillian handier,' replied the other rather drily. 'Lorimer is too stiff and English for the likes of me, and my mother was an Irishwoman. Well, as I was saying, I just put the question out of sheer curiosity, and Luke just hummed and hawed in his lordly way. "A nice, ladylike woman," says he, "and very intelligent and pleasant. You go and see her, Aunt Gill"—the boy often calls me that. Woman indeed! Why, you are just lovely, my dear; and it is not blarney either, for I have taken a liking to you.'

'You are much too kind,' returned Sheila in great confusion. Then her sense of humour overcame her, and she began to laugh. Miss Gillian stared at her in rather an affronted way; but Sheila's merriment was infectious, and after a moment she laughed too.

The situation was intensely comical. Sheila hardly

dared glance at the droll little figure beside her. Miss Gillian wore a wonderful Victorian bonnet, tied down by a black lace scarf, and she had a little red silk shawl over her shoulders, and a short black skirt that displayed her neat little feet incased in strong country shoes. There were diamond rings on her tiny hands, and her smooth, unwrinkled face still retained its beauty. Even in this first visit Sheila wondered to herself why she was still Miss Gillian. 'What must she have been in her youth?' she thought; and she was not surprised when Mr. Brett told her later that his aunt had been a great beauty when she was young, and had refused innumerable offers.

'How strange that she should have remained single,' she observed to Ned one day.

'No, I should not call it strange,' he returned quietly. 'Perhaps the right man came too late, or perhaps he died, or there were complications and misunderstanding. Women keep their own counsel. "If I can't get Mr. Right, I would never degrade myself by taking Mr. Wrong"—I remember you once said that to me, and I thought you a sensible woman.'

'In that case she was right,' returned Sheila; and a little twinge crossed her, as she remembered Mark. How seldom she thought of him now! Mark belonged to her youth; he was part of the distant past. Her nature was faithful, and she would have waited for him; but what if his return had brought disillusion and disappointment? They were both so young. Life had brought them so little experience. They had been boy and girl together. Perhaps at thirty it was natural that Sheila should ask herself the question whether Mark would have satisfied her if he had lived to come back to her.

Sheila would have apologised for her merriment, but Miss Gillian told her promptly not to waste her words.

‘I like a person to be natural,’ she returned. ‘People always laugh at me at first. They say they can’t help it; but when they know me better they think it is just Miss Gillian’s way, and put up with me as I am. Now there’s Martha Woodford, as I tell Luke sometimes—if there are saints nowadays that girl is one, for a sweeter and sounder nature could not be found anywhere.

“Never mind your want of beauty, Martha, my dear,” I say to her sometimes, for I always speak my mind to friend or foe. “You have got your share of good things, and a loving heart is better than a complexion all roses and lilies; and you may trust my judgment there, for when I was a giddy young thing they used to call me the Rose of Limerick.” And talking of Limerick,’ went on Miss Gillian, ‘reminds me, my dear, of an old beggar wife’s speech to me. “Arrah, darlint,” says she, “shure, you are a little stray angel come down on airth, and they will just be missing you up above, mavourneen; and faix it is Judy Sullivan who knows it.” Poor old Judy, I always called it my six-penny compliment; but it was cheap at the price’; and Miss Gillian gave a cheery little laugh as she rose from her seat.

‘Now I must be stepping across to the Cottage, for Martha will be expecting me. But you will come and see me soon? I am generally at home in the afternoon.’ And Miss Gillian dropped her a playful little curtsey, and then kissed her hand to her at the gate; and Sheila went up to her brother’s study to regale his ears with an account of her amusing visitor.

CHAPTER XIII

BETTY HAS AN ADVENTURE

But yet the pity of it, Iago ! O Iago, the pity of it, Iago !—*Othello*.

For this relief much thanks.—*Hamlet*.

ONE warm July morning a few weeks later Betty Woodford was walking up Church Road on her way from the vicarage. In spite of the heat Betty was enjoying herself. There was a delicious scent of new-mown hay in the air, mingled with the aromatic fragrance of firs. Betty, who had not a care in the world, would have liked to have sung for sheer light-heartedness and gladness.

‘After all, it is a beautiful old world,’ she said to herself; ‘if people’s manners would only match it!’ And Betty began whistling, and then checked herself as she perceived that she was not alone on the road.

A man was walking slowly on the shady side; by his dress he seemed to be an artisan, and he limped slightly. As Betty overtook him he suddenly stopped, and leant for support against some palings as though he were tired or in pain. As he turned his head she saw to her surprise that he was young.

Betty, who was never shy or backward with strangers, accosted him at once.

‘I am afraid you are not well—you seem in pain,’ she said kindly ; ‘is there anything I can do?’

‘I have hurt my foot,’ returned the young man ; ‘there seems to be a nail running into it. I must get my boot off and see, for it is laming me.’ He winced with pain as he spoke. To Betty’s surprise his voice was cultured, and, in spite of his working dress, he had the air of a gentleman.

‘You must not walk another step,’ returned Betty, rather alarmed at his pallor. ‘I know the woman who lives in this cottage, and I am sure she will let you sit down in her kitchen and rest your foot. I will go and ask her.’ And the stranger muttered a word of thanks as he hobbled painfully after her up the little garden-path.

Mrs. Deeds came bustling out to greet the young lady,—Betty was a great favourite of hers. Indeed, Betty’s friends in the village might be termed legion, for she was on speaking terms with every man, woman, and child on Church Green and its environs.

‘Halloo, Miss Woodford, bean’t ye coming to our place?’ was a customary greeting from shock-headed urchins swinging on gates ; while tiny children would toddle after her, signifying in baby language that they wished to be noticed.

Mrs. Deeds was quite ready with offers of hospitality to Betty’s *protégé*. She was a gossiping, good-natured creature. She shook up the cushion of her master’s chair, and the young man was not slow to avail himself of the invitation. Though neither of the women guessed it, he was fairly spent with fatigue and pain and want of food ; and as Betty thoughtfully placed a little wooden stool for the wounded foot, the object of her care quietly sank back against the cushions and fainted.

Mrs. Deeds uttered an exclamation of dismay ; but Betty, who, with all her fussiness, had plenty of common-sense, asked her for some water, and dipping her own handkerchief in it, she gently bathed his face. There was no brandy to be got except by sending to the vicarage, so she begged for a glass of sweet new milk, and as soon as the stranger opened his eyes she held it to his lips.

‘Drink this, it will do you good,’ she said. And to her relief the glass was instantly drained.

‘Thanks awfully,’ he murmured ; and as he looked at her gratefully, Betty was struck by some vague resemblance that somehow eluded her. She had never seen him before, and yet his face seemed familiar to her. His eyes reminded her of some one she knew, yet who could it be ?

His features were undeniably handsome, though they were worn and sharpened as though by privation or illness. The rough, untrimmed condition of his hair and moustache, and the shabbiness of his clothes, had led her to suppose him a mechanic out of work. But his voice and the delicacy of the long-fingered hands puzzled her. Betty had sufficient knowledge of the world to guess that gentlemen in fustian, with broken boots, were generally shady customers. But even a tramp in trouble would have appealed to her.

‘Do you think you could get your boot off now ?’ she suggested, after a glance at his face. ‘I daresay Mrs. Deeds would help you.’

But the young man shook his head. ‘I had better do it myself.’ And setting his teeth, he pulled it off ; but the torn sock was stained with blood.

‘Why, it is all blistered and sore !’ exclaimed Betty in a shocked voice. ‘Mrs. Deeds, you must let me

have a tub of hot water for this'—Betty stumbled at the word 'gentleman' and substituted 'person.' 'His foot is in a dreadful state.'

Mrs. Deeds was hospitable, but she was also busy ; for, as she explained, she had to cook her master's dinner.

'I will fetch you the water, and welcome, Miss Woodford,' she said ; 'but I have not a minute to spare, for the potatoes aren't peeled yet and my master isn't one to wait.'

'Oh, I could easily do it,' returned Betty cheerily. One would have thought from her tone that bathing the feet of tramps was a daily occurrence in her life. She set aside the young man's feeble objections and ordered him quite peremptorily to take off his other boot. 'Nothing is so healing as hot water,' she observed sedately. 'I daresay Mrs. Deeds will let us have some nice clean rag to wrap them in.'

Betty was too full of her charitable business to wonder why a tramp's foot should be so small and white. The sock was soiled and somewhat grimy, but not the foot. Betty was just starting off for the rag when she felt a touch on her arm, and the young man looked at her wistfully.

'I am almost ashamed to ask—but you are so kind—but if I might beg for a further favour—a crust of bread and cheese ; for I have had no food since yesterday morning, and——' His voice shook a little as though from weakness, and Betty saw there were tears in his eyes.

'Mrs. Deeds'—Betty pursued that much-enduring woman to the outhouse, where she was washing vegetables, and a few minutes later a brown loaf and butter and cheese was placed before the wayfarer ; and then with much tact she withdrew until he had finished his

meal. He smiled at her as she re-entered, and again that mysterious likeness evaded her.

‘I feel better,’ he said gratefully; ‘and now the nail is out of my boot, I think I can hobble a bit. It can’t be much farther—close to the links, they said. Perhaps, as you live in the place, you may know the name of Lassiter?’

‘Of course I do.’ Then Betty stopped as though she were suddenly galvanised. She knew now of whom he reminded her; it was Miss Lassiter—the eyes, expression, smile were hers. Betty felt positively giddy, but she did not betray herself. ‘Do you mean the Lassiters who live at The Moorings?’ she asked. Then the young man nodded.

‘The Moorings—that’s the place. Well, as I am so near the end of my journey, I had better be getting on. I have no right to be taking up your time like this.’

‘We live just opposite The Moorings,’ returned Betty, trying to speak calmly, but she felt much disturbed; ‘and the Lassiters are friends of ours. Do you know them—have you any business with them?’ Betty put the questions a little breathlessly, and waited anxiously for the answer.

‘Not business exactly’—here the young man laughed a little nervously—‘but all the same I want to see them. Perhaps you may have heard from them that they had a brother out in Australia of whom they have not had news for years.’ But Betty shook her head.

‘No indeed. Do you mean—is it possible——’ but here Betty stopped and caught her breath. If a volcano had suddenly opened in Sleepy Hollow she could not have been more aghast.

The young man looked a little disconcerted. 'I wonder why they kept it dark,' he muttered; 'it was not like Ned or Sheila either. All the same, my name is Ivor Lassiter.'

'Oh dear, oh dear!' exclaimed Betty. 'Then you were on the way to The Moorings when I overtook you?'

'Yes; I had been walking since daybreak, and I was pretty much at the end of my tether. But I have met with a good Samaritan, which is more than I deserved. Thanks to your kindness, I think I can get on now, Miss—oh, I forgot I do not know your name.'

'I am Betty Woodford,' returned the girl promptly; 'and, as we are neighbours, I can show you the way if you like.' Then a flush crossed Ivor's face.

'You are very good—if you are sure you do not mind'—and the poor fellow glanced at his frayed trousers and trodden-down boots. 'People will take me for a tramp; and, to tell you the truth, I feel like one myself, for I slept under a haystack last night. Not that it was any hardship on a warm night—and I have often slept out in the Bush—but it has not improved my appearance.'

He spoke in a tone of mingled bitterness and shame that appealed to Betty's tender heart.

'What does it matter?' she said kindly; 'I never care what people think, and we may as well go together.' She gave him one of her bright, cheery smiles, which seemed to animate him with fresh courage, and without another word he took up his battered straw hat and followed her. He still walked with difficulty, so their progress was slow.

As they turned into the main road, a sudden mis-giving crossed the girl's mind, and she accosted her companion.

‘Will it not be too great a shock their seeing you like this, without any preparation?’ she asked. ‘Would it not be better if I were to go on and say a word to Miss Lassiter?’ But Ivor would not hear of this.

‘No,’ he said a little moodily, ‘I would rather do my own business. I daresay they have been expecting me to turn up any time these eight years.’

‘Eight years! But surely you have written to them?’ Then again there was an ashamed look on the young man’s face.

‘I wrote for the first year or two; but it seems they never got my letters, for I had no answer; and then somehow I left off writing. Yes, it must be nearly eight years, for I was only nineteen when I left Cottingdean, and I am over seven-and-twenty now.’

‘But they must think you are dead!’ Betty spoke in a shocked voice; but it was evident that this idea had never crossed Ivor’s mind.

‘Do you think so?’ he said, rather startled at this; ‘perhaps in that case it might be well to prepare them.’ He paused irresolutely; he was evidently reluctant to employ a go-between, and yet if the girl were right and Sheila thought he was dead!

They were just at the top of Sandy Lane, and in another moment Betty would have pointed out The Moorings to him.

‘Perhaps you had better let them know,’ he said at last, ‘and I can wait here if you like.’ But he was too late, for as he spoke Betty saw Sheila coming towards them, with Kaiser bounding before her.

Ivor saw her too, and turned very pale.

Kaiser, who was still a young dog, was not likely to recognise him, and was snuffing suspiciously at what

he supposed was a tramp. Kaiser hated tramps and all poorly-dressed people, and Sheila in rather an alarmed voice called him off.

‘Kaiser, come here instantly. Down, you bad dog—leave the man alone.’ But Ivor, who understood all animals, merely patted the dog’s head.

‘You will know me better next time, old fellow,’ he said, but his voice shook a little with agitation. ‘Don’t be afraid, Sheila, he will not hurt me.’ Then, as she heard the supposed tramp utter her name, Sheila grew as white as death.

‘Oh,’ she said faintly ; and then, as though she were unable to say more, she pushed past Betty in the narrow path and gripped the young man’s coat with both hands.

‘Who is it that calls me Sheila?’ Then, as Ivor looked at her and tried to smile, she fell on his breast with a cry of joy.

‘Oh, my darling, is it you—Ivor, really Ivor?’ And she kissed him and fondled him, stroking his pale face with her trembling hand, with little cooing expressions of mingled pity and pleasure. The tears came to Betty’s eyes as she watched her. Her poor prodigal was in good hands, she thought.

‘Sheila, dear old She, you are too good to me. I have not deserved this—this welcome—I have treated you both so badly. I have been such a selfish cad—a regular brute.’ But Sheila put her hand over his lips.

‘Hush, darling, there is no need to call yourself names ; you have come back to us, and my prayers are answered, as I knew they would be some day. Come, let us go to Ned’ ; and she took his arm and turned him gently in the direction of The Moorings. ‘Dear Ned, how rejoiced he will be, and Eppie too!’

Both of them had forgotten Betty, who was looking after them with wistful eyes. Sheila's thoughts were absorbed with joy and gratitude ; but it was Ivor who remembered her, and who, with gentlemanly instinct, came back to thank her and wish her good-bye.

'Sheila does not know yet how much I owe to your kindness,' he said gratefully ; 'perhaps, as you live so near, I may see you again'—and he grasped her hand.

Betty smiled vaguely at him, but she made no response—her little adventure was ending rather flatly. She followed slowly down the path, until the gate closed behind them ; then she quickened her pace. Martha looked up from her work with some surprise as Betty entered the room.

'How late you are, Bee,' she said quietly. 'Luncheon will be ready in a moment, and father has been asking for you. What have you been doing, dear ? you look so hot and tired.'

'I have been walking with a tramp,' returned Betty, with a nervous little laugh, for all this had upset her. 'He had broken boots, and the edges of his trousers were frayed and ragged, and oh, his socks, Marty ! and he had a nail in his boot, and his feet were all festered and sore, and I bathed them.'

'What !' exclaimed Martha in an astonished voice. 'My dear Bee, you bathed the feet of a common tramp !'

Then Betty's eyes began to twinkle, and she went on glibly : 'Oh, he wasn't a common tramp, you see ; and Mrs. Deeds gave me a nice tub of hot water. The poor fellow fainted, and we found he had had no food since yesterday, and he had slept under a haystack'—here Betty laughed and then choked a little. 'And his name is Ivor Lassiter ; and Sheila hugged him when she saw him and called him "darling" ; and—oh dear, what a

goose I am !' And Betty, to her own surprise and Martha's dismay, suddenly burst out crying and ran out of the room, leaving Martha to digest this extraordinary piece of intelligence.

Meanwhile Sheila had left Ivor in the passage and had sought her brother. He was finishing some work and hardly looked up at her entrance, and she stood opposite him for a few moments in silence.

'Ned,' she said at last.

'I am very busy—must you interrupt me, my dear ?' Ned's tone was a trifle impatient. Authors are liable to be irritable when the divine afflatus is upon them. Ned's imagination had just struck a rich vein ; the chariot wheels of his fancy no longer drove heavily ; he had a store of wealth to unfold. At another time the brightness of his eyes and his repressed excitement would have warned her to withdraw with her errand untold, but to-day she remained.

'Ned, I am sorry, but I cannot go until I have told you something.' Then as he looked up, struck by the unusual agitation of her tone, he saw she was very pale and that her eyes were full of tears.

'Ned, we have news of our boy at last'—her voice was low and she almost whispered the words.

Then he gave her a keen glance. 'Oh, I see,' he said quietly. 'I can read your face, She—Ivor has come home.' He laid down his pen, pulling himself together as he did so. 'Where is the boy?—I will go to him.' But Ivor, who was standing outside, at that moment entered the room and stood a shabby figure in the sunlight.

'Ned, I have turned up again like a bad penny,' he said with a deprecatory smile. 'Don't be harder on me than you can help, old fellow ; for I am in Queer Street and no mistake.'

CHAPTER XIV

‘DON’T BE TOO HARD ON THE LAD!’

In your life’s shipwreck you might have saved yourself but that you were ashamed to seize your plank of safety, and so went to the bottom.—
CARMEN SYLVA.

As Ned grasped his brother’s hand, his face worked and he was silent with repressed emotion, but there was a pained look in his eyes.

Sheila’s whole-souled tenderness had, however, no such cloud. The prodigal had returned to them in sorry plight, but she had only rejoiced over him as of one from the dead. He was Ivor, and still her darling, and nothing else mattered. But to Ned the gladness was mingled with bitterness; and though there was no want of kindness in his greeting, something in his manner seemed to embarrass Ivor.

‘Don’t be harder on me than you can help, Ned,’ he said again. As he stood there, a forlorn, dejected object, in the sunshine, his battered, weary, footsore appearance filled Ned with indignant pity.

Eight years before, the boy had left their roof, secretly and without compunction, to seek his fortune in the wide world, and from that day no word had reached them from the wanderer. How was a man,

even though he was a brother, to forget such black-hearted selfishness and ingratitude. Could any father have done more for him than he had—and Sheila too, whose love had been truly maternal? And yet all these years Ivor had never cared to inquire if they were living or dead!

Ned felt something like the Elder Brother in the parable as he stood there during those first few minutes. He would say no word of reproach that should break the bruised reed, but neither could he pretend to a gladness that he did not feel.

'So you have come back to us, Ivor, because the world has not treated you well,' he said at last, putting his hand on the young man's shoulder. The tone was kindly, but, alas, the words were too true to be contradicted. Ned had not meant to say them, but he was not quite master of himself.

Ivor shrank a little under his brother's firm grasp. 'I could not help it,' he returned sadly. 'I was ashamed to write and let you know how badly I was getting on. Nothing seemed to go right with me. Of course you are not pleased to see me, Ned. When I think how I have treated you and Sheila, I could not hope for a warm reception; but I knew you would not let a fellow starve.'

'No, you were right there.' But at that moment Sheila hastily interposed. Ned's constrained manner and pained expression filled her with alarm. Ned was her dearer self, and she could not be hard on him, but her heart bled for Ivor.

'Dear Ned,' she said pleadingly, 'why need we trouble about the past? We must forgive as we hope to be forgiven. Ivor has come back to us. He has been ill, and is nearly starved. Look at his poor face—'

how thin and sharp it is.' And again there was a rush of bitterness and pity in Ned's heart.

'Yes, I see. Well, Ivor, lad, I will do my best for you. Sheila'—turning to her as usual for advice and help—'do you think we ought to let Eppie see him like this? And then there is Ruth.' But Sheila's answer was conclusive. 'Take him to your room, dear, and give him some fresh linen. If he could only wear your clothes—but that is impossible. I will tell Eppie to keep back the luncheon for half an hour.' And Ned nodded and withdrew.

Ivor was only too thankful to follow him. When the brothers reappeared, Ivor looked a different being. The luxury of a warm bath and clean linen had freshened him immensely, and, in spite of his dilapidated garments, he had lost his cowed, down-trodden look.

The news had been broken to Eppie, and as Ivor appeared at the kitchen door, the faithful creature rushed at him and flung her arms round him. 'Oh, my bonny man,' she sobbed,—'my ain wee laddie! Oh, but it makes my heart leap to see your face again. I am an auld dune body, but I'm clean driven dottle with joy'; and Eppie threw her apron over her head to hide the tears that were running down her rugged face. 'May the Almichty have mercy upon us for doubting Him!' they heard her murmur. 'And if our laddie has done any wrang, dinna cast it up against him, for we are sinners all—and ye ken the lave.'

'Amen,' whispered Ned. And then with full hearts they gathered round the table, and Eppie, sending Ruth from the room, waited on them herself.

In spite of Sheila's efforts, it was rather a silent meal. Ned, who had recovered himself, strove to draw his brother into conversation; but Ivor seemed depressed

and uncommunicative, and answered almost in monosyllables; and Sheila, with quick tact, gave Ned a sign to leave him in peace.

Eppie created a diversion when she bore in the pudding with a triumphant look. 'It is the bairn's favourite,' she whispered in Sheila's ear; and as she carried round the plate to Ivor, she patted him on the shoulder.

'Ye'll ken it weel, my laddie,' she said in a coaxing voice. 'Aye, many a time have you given me the cry for golden pudding. What for no do you not eat it?' But Ivor laid down his fork with a smile that went to Sheila's heart.

'I know it well, Eppie; but I have feasted royally, and I have not been used to such luxurious meals. There, I will taste it to please you, but I can do no more. I think I am too tired to eat.' Then, at Sheila's bidding, the plate was taken away.

When luncheon was over, Ned informed them that he would be obliged to leave them for an hour. 'I have not quite finished my article,' he said, 'and I promised the editor that it should go by the evening post. You had better take Ivor to the garden; he will be glad of a little rest and quiet.'

Then Sheila saw a look of relief on Ivor's face. Ned's presence evidently embarrassed him. Perhaps there was something that he wanted to say to her alone. He seemed greatly depressed, and even Ned's kindness had not cheered him; and Sheila's head sank a little as she saw the moodiness of his face.

She led the way to the shady corner under the firs; and as Ivor stretched himself with a sigh of comfort on a hammock chair, she sat down beside him. 'Ivor dear,' she said, and there was exquisite tenderness in

her voice, 'there is something troubling you. We are not making you happy. Ned is so good and kind, and yet you seem to avoid talking to him.' But here she stopped, dismayed at the change in his expression. His face had grown suddenly white again, and he seemed hardly able to speak. The next moment his head was buried in his hands.

'That is just it,' he muttered. 'I am afraid of him. Ned is so straight, he won't understand how a fellow is tempted, and he will think me such a pitiful cur. Sheila,' turning to her with a sort of desperation, 'there is no hiding things, and I may as well make a clean breast to you. I am married.'

Now it was Sheila's turn to look pale, and it was evident from her face that Ivor's words had given her a shock.

'Married!' she gasped.

'Yes, for the last seven years. I was little more than a boy when I made a fool of myself; and Nell was young too. We were just a couple of children, She.' But here Ivor groaned. 'I have got to think of her and the kids. There is a boy and a girl; the other two are dead.'

'You have two children living?' The crescendo note in Sheila's tone spoke of dire dismay.

'Yes; a girl of six—Bunnie; she is such a good little soul, and so sensible for her age'; here there was a trace of fatherly pride in Ivor's voice. 'Tom is just three; he is delicate like his mother. Nell, poor girl, has had a hard life of it. I could not get on over there, so I brought them to England. I had enough scraped up for the passage-money—of course we came steerage—but the few pounds that remained have all gone. I could not even pay the railway fare down

here. I had to walk every step of the way. I had been down to Cottingdean and got your address. I would have waited to write, but we had only a shilling between us, and Nell and the kids must be fed.'

Sheila put her hand to her throat as though something choked her, but her words were quiet enough. 'If things were as bad as that, you should have written, Ivor, and told us the truth. You know Ned and I would have come to you. It was not right to keep all this from us, as though we were strangers; it was not kind, my dear.' It was her sole reproach to him, and the gentleness of her voice quite unmanned Ivor. He laid down his head on the table and sobbed like a child. Hardship and sickness had broken his spirit, and Sheila's soft, compassionate tone was too much for him.

'It is not for myself—I deserve to starve,' he went on presently; 'but I can't face the children asking me for food. London is such a cruel place, She: miles of houses and thousands of faces, and not one helping hand held out to a poor chap in misfortune. I can't get work. They won't trust me; my appearance is not respectable enough, and they think me a shady customer—and no wonder. And if Ned will not help me, we must go to the workhouse, unless I break stones on the road.'

'My poor dear—my poor dear boy!' Sheila was kneeling beside him now, and her arm was round him. What did it matter that he had deserted and left them in the dark all these years! He was ill, unhappy, and he needed her—could there be stronger claims to any woman?

'Dear Ivor, Ned will surely help you; but you must tell me more, and then we can consult together. There must be no more holding back—let us know the truth.'

‘You shall know everything as far as I know it,’ returned Ivor wearily; ‘but it has been a muddle from beginning to end. At first I got on fairly well. I was determined to see the world and have my fling; and I and another fellow, George Garnett—you remember Garnett, She, though you never liked him—well, we worked our way to America.’

‘Do you mean that dreadful boy was with you? Oh, Ivor, when you knew how Ned warned you against him, and would never allow him to come to the house!’

Ivor shrugged his shoulders drearily. ‘I don’t want to excuse myself—it was all of a piece—but I was infatuated with George, and he managed to keep me under his influence. We kept together a bit—picking up jobs and amusing ourselves as well as we could. Then I hired myself out as travelling attendant to an invalid gentleman going to Sydney. I came across him somehow, and he took a fancy to me; and if I had kept my situation it would have been better for me; but I got sick of it after a time and threw it up. After that I got a clerkship in a store, and though the pay was small, I managed to live on it; and if I had not met Nell——’ he paused, but Sheila’s eyes asked him to proceed, and he went on hurriedly:

‘Nell wasn’t what you call a lady, Sheila, but she was a good sort all the same. She served in the same Store—she was in the haberdashery department—but we used to walk home together at night. She was rather pretty then—very fair and slight—only I am afraid you and Ned might have thought her common. Her father was—he was an agent for a coal depôt—and they lived in some pokey little rooms behind the office. It was such a grubby little place—

the windows all caked with coal-dust—but it looked cosy enough of an evening, with a bright fire and the curtains drawn. Nell's mother was dead, and she and old Josiah Cobbe lived alone. He wasn't a bad fellow—though he would eat his dinner in his shirt-sleeves—and Nell was very fond of him.

'I think it was because I knew no one in Sydney that I felt drawn to Nell; she was a bit lonely too. I don't know that I was exactly in love with her; but I saw she liked me, and I could not help noticing how she brightened up when I came near. That sort of thing appeals to a man's vanity, and very soon I fancied myself in love.'

'Oh, my poor misguided boy!' but Sheila was fondling his hand as she spoke. If she had given utterance to her thoughts at that moment she would have said: 'What is the use of reproaching him? If he has sinned, he has been punished enough. He has hung a millstone round his own neck, and he will have to drag it after him all his life long. If Ned is angry with him, I must take his part; he was so young, it was just thoughtlessness'; and here Sheila stiffened inwardly. "The woman beguiled me, and I did eat," she said to herself. For, with all her generosity, Sheila felt inclined to turn a cold shoulder to Ivor's wife.

'Nell was quite inclined to marry me,' he went on; 'in fact, when I asked her, she cried for joy, and told me that she had been in love with me ever since I had spoken so kindly to her the first evening. "Of course, I see you are a cut above me," she said; "and I can tell from your ways and speech that you have mixed with gentlefolk. I am just a rough little Colonial girl, and as for father——" but I would not

let her go on in that strain. I told her a clerk who only had fifty pounds a year had no right to be proud. Well, the long and short of it was, we determined to be married; and as Nell would not leave her father, and Josiah was willing to put up with my company, we all packed into that grimy little nest behind the coal-yard. It was not much of a place certainly, but it was better than a lonely garret and a nagging, scolding landlady. Nell was a good little girl, if she was a bit rough, and she made me fairly comfortable, though I own I was homesick at times, and wished myself back in Brook Street. I could not bear to let you know I was married; I just put it off from day to day, and then I was ashamed to write.

‘Nell went to the Store for a few months after we were married, and then she fainted one day and was forced to give it up; but I got a rise, and we had no rent to pay, and old Cobbe was good to us, and while he lived we did pretty well.’

Sheila sighed, she was trying to picture it, how narrow and squalid it all sounded.

‘Nell was ailing for a long time after Bunnie was born. We called her after you, Sheila, but she had given herself the name of Bunnie, and we have never used any other.’

‘The coal-yard was not the best sort of place for children, and in the hot weather Nell and the baby drooped sadly. I don’t want to make a long story of it, She. There were two other children born there—boys both of them, and fine little fellows; but one terribly hot summer, when there was a good deal of sickness in Sydney, especially among children, we lost them both. It was some sort of low fever, but the

doctor said that better air and nourishment would have saved them—that they had no chance in that stifling hole. Nell nearly broke her heart. Ned was such a pretty little fellow; and though Willie was only a baby, he was such a bright, lively child. Don't cry about it, She—they are better off, poor little chaps.' And Ivor frowned and looked distressed as Sheila wiped away her tears.

'It is such a sad story, dear, and you have gone through so much.'

'You are right there. But let me finish—there is not much more to tell. Soon after Tom was born, poor old Cobbe died, and we had to clear out of the yard. Tom was always sickly from the first—I suppose his mother had fretted too much—and many a time we thought we should have lost him; but he always pulled through. Often and often, when Nell was dropping with fatigue, I have had to walk up and down the room with him at night, when his fretting would not let us sleep. I had stuck to my work all this time, but I soon found that it was impossible to keep out of debt. Our lodgings were poor enough, but they were too dear for us; and one day, when they gave me the sack, I determined to come home.'

'Your employers turned you off. But why, Ivor?'

'Oh, I failed to give them satisfaction. They said that I made so many mistakes. On my word, there was nothing wrong, She; but the loss of my nights' rest, and the constant worry, nearly drove me wild. I think my illness must have been coming on. Nell begged me to see the chief and ask him to give me another trial, but I knew it was no good; besides, the home-sickness was too strong for me. I thought, if I could only get to England, that you and Ned might

help me to find employment. I know now that I was not in a right state to reason it out, though no one knew it—I was just sickening for the fever. Nell indeed tried to dissuade me, but I would not listen to her. A small sum of money had come to her from her father, and we sold off our few sticks of furniture and started for the old country.

‘I was ill during most of the voyage, and but for the doctor—a good chap he was too—I should have been long ago thrown overboard. It was a sort of low fever—not infectious, but very undermining to the constitution; but Dr. Maule’s care and Nell’s nursing brought me round.

‘There was a decent fellow on board, a plumber and glazier, who was coming home, with a bit of money, to set up business with his brother. He was an intelligent sort of chap, and had educated himself, and we fraternised together. He and Bunnie were great friends; and when I was at my worst, and Nell could not leave me, he would take the children on deck for a breath of fresh air. Sam Bell was his name, but the kids always called him “Uncle Sam.”

‘He was bound for Camberwell. But he told me that he had a sister living at Camden Town, and that, as she was a decent woman and the rooms were cheap, I could not do better than take them while I looked for work; and as we had not a notion where to go, I acted on his advice. I offered to pay a fortnight in advance, and Mrs. Jennings let us take her top floor, and we had some furniture from the broker’s. As our purse was getting low, I wanted to go down to Cottingdean and make inquiries; but I got wet one day and was laid up with another touch of fever, and it was nearly three weeks before I was strong enough for the journey.

'It was rather a shock to find you no longer lived there; but I felt more hopeful when I heard that Aunt Sarah had left you some money, and that you were settled at Uplands.

'There was no time to be lost. When the week's rent was paid there was only a shilling in my pocket, and I had to give that to Nell. I had to tramp every mile of the way, and to sleep, fasting, under a haystack. It is not a nice story, is it, She?' But Sheila could not speak for the tears that choked her utterance. She grew calmer presently.

'Ivor, it is all so sad and hopeless, but we must think what is to be done. There is Ned to be told'—here Ivor winced—'and it would be better for you to do it yourself.'

'Yes, I suppose so,' but it was easy to see that Ivor was funkng it.

'I don't know how it is,' he said, with an uneasy laugh, 'but I was always a bit afraid of Ned, and I have the feeling still. But if it has to be done——' and here he looked appealingly at Sheila. But she was wise enough to harden her heart.

'Yes, it has to be done, darling, and you must do it,' she said firmly; and at that moment Ned came towards them from the house.

He was walking rather stiffly and holding his head high, and his face was unusually grave. His manner was so strange that Sheila looked at him in surprise.

'You must have dropped this in my room, Ivor,' he said in a judicial tone, 'and I have just found it'; and he handed a photograph to his brother.

It was only a common cheap photograph, and had been done by some amateur. There was a little family group—a young woman with a child on her lap and a

little girl beside her, but the young man behind her was unmistakably Ivor.

‘Yes, I must have dropped it,’ returned Ivor hastily, but he changed colour and avoided Ned’s eyes.

‘I hope you have told Sheila that you have a wife and children,’ observed Edward dryly, and he would have turned and left them only Sheila caught his arm.

‘Ned, you must hear him ; it is all so sad, and Ivor knows how wrong he has been.’

‘I will tell you all about it, Ned, if you will only listen,’ returned Ivor in a weak, spent voice, that somehow drove the frown from Ned’s brow. Why did a sudden recollection cross his memory ? He was standing by his father’s bedside, a feeble hand was holding his—‘Don’t be too hard on the lad, Ned ! The boy takes after me.’

‘Yes, I will hear you’ ; Ned turned suddenly round on his brother, and there was a gleam of kindness in his eyes. Great God, how like Ivor was to his father ! After all, they were brothers. ‘Now let me hear the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, for heaven’s sake,’—and Ned composed himself to listen.

CHAPTER XV

THE ELDER BROTHER

A more glorious victory cannot be gained over another man than this, that when the injury begins on his part, the kindness should begin on ours.—TILLOTSON.

THE story had been told, and Ivor, worn out with fatigue and emotion, had retired to his room and had already sunk into heavy sleep. When Sheila went in search of Ned, she found him pacing up and down the ivy-covered pergola, solacing himself as usual with his pipe. 'My Lady Nicotine,' as he would say, 'is the best sort of mate a man can have. She is for better and for worse. If I ever feel inclined to cut my throat, I shall just light my pipe, and criminal instincts will vanish into smoke. Ah, She, what you miss by being a woman!' and Ned's shrug of the shoulder conveyed a vast amount of contemptuous pity.

Sheila felt vaguely anxious. Ned had treated his brother with forbearance and kindness. He had said little, it is true, but as far as possible he had tried to refrain from any expression of disapproval or censure. When Ivor had blundered through his confession, Ned had sat for a few minutes in silence; then he put his hand on his brother's shoulder.

'You need not say any more, I can grasp things

now. You are dead-beat, old fellow ; Eppie will have got your room ready, and I advise you to have a long night's rest ' ; and Ivor was thankful to take this advice.

Sheila accompanied him to see that all was ready for his accommodation. The large front attic had been set apart as a guest-room. As Ivor looked round the spacious apartment, in spite of its sloping walls and homely furniture, it seemed to him almost palatial. The window was low, but a glorious view stretched before him. Ivor thought of the rooms with their tiny casements opening on the coal-yard, and then of the two bare little attics in Juniper Place, and the tears rose to his eyes. If only Nell and the children could have had all this space and fresh air ! And then he thought of his boys, who had pined and sickened in the hot, stifling atmosphere. ' It is the innocent who suffer,' he groaned ; but he was too spent to indulge long in remorseful reflections.

Sheila had stolen to his door to assure herself that he was asleep before she went into the garden. It was growing dusk now—the sweet, uncertain gloaming of a summer evening—and the milk-white bloom of the nicotianas gleamed from the garden walks, their fragrance somewhat overpowered by Ned's pipe. It was just the hour when they loved to pace up and down, now silent and now talking of any subject that interested them ; and at such times Ned would speak of his day's work, of the book he had been reading—' thinking aloud,' as he called it, to the sister who was his other self.

' Well, Sheila ? ' It was his sole greeting ; and then they turned as usual into the kitchen-garden, but for a time nothing more was said.

' Ivor is asleep,' she observed presently. ' I stole into his room, but he never heard me. He looks just

his old self, Ned, only his face is so thin and worn. How he must have suffered! Did you notice the hollows in his temples?’

‘I noticed everything,’ replied Ned rather gloomily; for there were limits even to ‘my Lady Nicotine’s’ influence, and one could hardly appreciate the full flavour of a pipe when one’s little world was in chaos.

‘I suppose one must pay the penalty of behaving like a madman,’ he went on. ‘Shylock is not the only creditor who will have his pound of flesh. I take it, an apostle cannot be far wrong when he says we must reap as we sow. If we sow tares we shall reap tares—and only a fool would expect a crop of corn.’

‘Ivor has been punished,’ returned Sheila sadly. ‘In rags and starving! Oh, if you had seen Eppie crying over his socks! And his boots, why, they could hardly hold together’; for, being a woman, she realised the outward and visible signs of the prodigal. But to Ned they were merely symbolical of inward destitution.

‘He has done wrong and must suffer for it,’ he said rather sternly. ‘Good heavens, Sheila, surely you cannot defend his conduct! A clerk earning his fifty pounds per annum in a store and marrying on this salary—a shop-girl too! And then bringing helpless creatures into a world which has more kicks than halfpence for beggars’ brats. When I think of the gross selfishness, the weak, exasperating folly of the whole thing, I feel that I can hardly trust myself to look at him.’

‘Dear Ned, we must be patient; what is done cannot be undone.’ But Ned was too much absorbed in his bitter reflections to pay any heed to Sheila’s remark.

‘Mark my words,’ he went on, ‘Ivor is responsible

for his boys' death—in a sense he is a murderer. He married and brought children into the world, though he knew he could not maintain them. Why, the very birds of the air rebuke him—do they hatch their young until the nest is warmly lined? What did that Sydney doctor say—that better air and food would have saved the boys? Good heavens, if such words had been said to me—if such an inhuman crime had been imputed to me, I would have hung a millstone round my neck and thrown myself into the nearest mill-dam!’

But he spoke figuratively, as Sheila knew. It was the indignation of the elder brother—of the strong man over the weak, tempted one. ‘There goes John Baxter save for the grace of God’ had been a worthy speech handed down for all time, but it had not occurred to Ned at that moment. Edward Lassiter was not self-righteous, he had nothing of the Pharisee about him, but he had an utter contempt for weak self-indulgence or fatuous folly; in being angry he was only acting according to his nature. His own life had been hard-working and joyless, and its very limitations had shielded him from temptations. If he had loved any woman he would have desired to marry her, but no such woman had crossed his orbit, and so all pain of conflict had been spared him. Nevertheless, he knew well, and his guardian angel knew it too, that if any such temptation had assailed him, he would have had a fierce wrestle for the mastery.

Ned could close his lips firmly, but he could not conceal from his own inner consciousness that he despised Ivor for his weak selfishness. And Sheila's face clouded more and more as she listened to him.

It was better for him to say what he thought, and she would not check him if she could help it. But

it was growing late, and there was much to decide. Perhaps it was owing to some transmission of thought, but, as Sheila sighed, Ned suddenly pulled himself together.

‘Well, it is no good talking ; Ivor is here, and we have got to put up with him. And now the question is—What is to be done?’

‘That is what I have been thinking.’ Sheila was so suspiciously ready with her answer, that it was evident that she had come to some sort of conclusion. ‘Ned, I have been wondering if it would not be best to go back with him to-morrow and see his wife and the children. We might take them a few comforts, and find out what they need most.’

‘We had better take the early train, and then we shall have the day before us.’ As Ned uttered no word of objection, it was evident that he recognised the reasonableness of this suggestion. ‘Great minds jump together,’ he was fond of saying, and neither he nor Sheila were likely to beat about the bush when there was work to be done.

‘I had better take Ivor to Tottenham Court Road,’ he continued, ‘and get him some ready-made clothes and some boots ; we cannot let any one see him as he is.’

‘No indeed,’ sighed Sheila ; ‘and he must have his hair cut, it looks so long and wild. ‘I wonder what Betty could think of him.’ But at this allusion Ned’s face darkened again ; it hurt his pride cruelly that their kind neighbours at the Old Cottage should hear this humiliating tale. He wondered what Miss Woodford would have said when Betty carried the story home. If only Betty had not mixed herself up with it, he thought irritably, and it must be owned rather

unreasonably. But Sheila, who had been much touched by Ivor's account of the girl's kindness and consideration, wrote a little note to Betty before she went to bed, thanking her so lovingly for all her goodness to her poor brother, that Betty nearly shed tears over it.

'I think I had better walk up to Burton's and order a fly for the early train,' suggested Ned, after a little more conversation ; but at this moment an interruption occurred.

They had been sauntering up and down the garden paths, and Sheila, who was tired, had paused for a moment to lean against the front gate and enjoy the fresh air blowing from the common. It was almost too dark to see each other's faces, and in the upper windows of the Old Cottage a light was moving to and fro.

The stillness, the darkness were so soothing and restful ! Now and then a night-moth brushed against them, or the harsh creaky note of the nightjar sounded in the distance ; but Sheila was lost in thought, and she started perceptibly as a tall dark figure emerged from the bushes—neither of them had heard footsteps in the soft ruts of Sandy Lane.

'I hope I have not startled you, Miss Lassiter,' and a voice that had grown familiar to her of late sounded close to her. 'I am afraid that I am a very late visitor, but as Peter insisted on a walk, I thought I would call and ask your brother for that number of the *Circle* he promised me.'

'Please do not apologise, we are always glad to see our friends—are we not, Sheila?' and Ned unlatched the gate ; but his tone was a little forced.

Mr. Brett had been a frequent visitor during these last few weeks. From the first the two men had been

mutually attracted. 'Brett suits me down to the ground,' Ned had remarked; while the vicar had observed to Miss Woodford on one occasion, 'I like Lassiter; he is a genuine product, and there's no humbug about him; it is the real thing, not a layer of good bricks and then shoddy and rubbish,' and Martha had understood this as high praise.

Ned had smoked the pipe of peace frequently in the vicar's sanctum, and it had grown rather a habit with Luke Brett to saunter up to The Moorings on what he called 'Peter's prow,' and join them in the garden. They always made him feel that he was welcome, and the hour that followed was one of refreshment to them all. Sheila, who seldom joined in the talk, sat by an interested listener, only putting in a word now and then when one or other of the gentlemen appealed to her.

Ruth had been lighting the hall lamp, and a pleasant radiance streamed on them as they went towards the house, followed by four very short legs and a body so near the ground that 'the Orphan' fled up a tree, thinking it was a new species of animal—not that Peter, pattering solemnly at his master's heels, would have noticed anything so frivolous.

Ned, who knew his duty, brought the chairs into the radius of the light, and Peter squatted contentedly at his master's feet. Propinquity to his master constituted Peter's notion of heaven. His idea of utter bliss was to curl himself up within reach of a fondling hand. When Mr. Brett touched him, a quiver of joy passed through his sensitive body. It was evident that this strange pair understood each other thoroughly.

Ned went to his study to look for the paper. Then Mr. Brett, who had stooped to pat his faithful

satellite, said in his quiet, level voice, 'I am afraid Peter and I are *de trop* to-night. Something is troubling you both. Shall I go away, or is there anything I can do?'

'No, oh no'—but Sheila sighed—'please do not go away; you always do Ned so much good. One must have troubles in this life——' Sheila stopped, and her expression was harassed. Ned's moodiness and depression had infected her. He had not rejoiced as she had over Ivor's return; but then, as Edward rather quaintly put it, 'he could have put up with Ivor barring his wife and children, but that was rather too large an order.'

'I wish you would treat me as a friend and tell me all about it'—Luke Brett's deep voice was very persuasive. People often said that the vicar was an excellent father confessor, and that there was something magnetic in his voice and manner when he chose to exercise his influence. Sheila, worn with the day's emotions, found herself unable to resist it.

'We have had a shock,' she faltered. 'You did not know—of course not, for we have not told any one here—that we have another brother.'

'No, I did not know that.' If Mr. Brett were surprised, he did not appear so; he only leant forward and played with the dachshund's long ears.

'Ivor is younger than either of us, and somehow he was always younger than his age, and he was weak and easily led.'

'Weak people give a good deal of trouble sometimes'—Mr. Brett was giving her a helping hand.

'You are right,' with a sigh. She was thankful that he understood her so quickly. 'Perhaps Ned was a little too strict with him—it was so difficult for him to

understand a nature like Ivor's—but I know he did his best and tried to be kind.

‘I think we may take that for granted,’ in a clear voice.

‘But all the same he made Ivor afraid of him, and it was very difficult to keep the peace between them’—Sheila spoke dejectedly; she had never named this before to any human being, but Luke’s quiet influence was making itself felt.

‘Peacemakers have their work cut out for them in this world,’ murmured her listener.

‘One morning Eppie came to me in a fright. Ivor’s bed had not been slept in that night. She brought me a pencilled note that he had scrawled. He had gone away to seek his fortune, and wished us good-bye—nothing more than that. It cut Ned to the heart to think of our boy stealing out of the house in the gray dawn. Oh, it does not bear thinking about even now—and that was eight years ago.’

‘But you have heard from him?’

‘No, not a word—all those weary years, not one word.’

Mr. Brett’s lips were slightly compressed at Sheila’s tone; its quiet patience seemed to speak to his trained ears of a whole gamut of emotion from suspense and fear to hopeless waiting and endurance.

‘Not one word,’ she repeated. ‘And then to-day he came. Betty Woodford met him in the village and showed him the way. I came upon them in Sandy Lane.’

‘Well—oh, please do not stop.’ Luke’s dark face was vivid with interest.

‘It was Ivor; I recognised him at once, but Kaiser thought he was a tramp, and I had to call him off.

He was shabby and worn, and was limping as though he were lame.—But here comes Ned. Of course he is terribly upset about all this.'

'I have been hunting all over the place for that number. I found it at last wedged in between the what-not and the wall.' Ned's voice was fatigued but triumphant; he hated to be beaten even in finding a book.

'Thanks,' returned the vicar briefly, as he held out his hand for the magazine.

'I have been a long time, I am afraid.' Then he caught sight of Sheila's face, and his expression changed. 'So you have been telling Mr. Brett about it, She?' But Sheila could not guess from Ned's ambiguous tone if he were sorry or relieved.

'I have not told him all, Ned—only that Ivor has come home.'

'Our version of the prodigal has its complications'—here Ned's short laugh was hardly mirthful. 'He has come back from the far country with a wife and two children. To-morrow we are to make the acquaintance of our sister-in-law.'

It was evident that Mr. Brett was surprised. This was worse than he expected,—it was easy to grasp the situation.

'I am sorry to hear this,' he said very gravely, but he looked at Sheila as he spoke. 'I can only hope, for both your sakes, that you may be favourably impressed with your brother's wife.'

'We are neither of us very sanguine on that point'—Ned spoke with forced calmness. 'She was a colonial girl, and from what Ivor tells us we cannot expect much.'

Ned could not bring himself to say more—he thought

the sordid details of the coal-yard need not be repeated—but Mr. Brett guessed much of the truth.

‘I cannot tell you how sorry I am for you, Lassiter,’ and Luke Brett’s voice was full of feeling; ‘if I can help you in any way, I hope you will tell me so. And you go up town to-morrow?’

‘How are we to help ourselves?’ and Ned spoke with concentrated bitterness. ‘My brother tells me that only the workhouse is before them. I believe they are even in need of food.’

‘Yes, I see there is no help for it—the duty is a plain one. But your sister looks worn out, and it is getting late; I will see you again and have a talk about this.’

‘If you will wait a moment I will walk down with you—I have to order the fly’; and as Ned went into the house a moment, Mr. Brett turned to Sheila.

‘Thank God that his shoulders are broad enough for the burden; I do not fear for him or you either,’—he took her hand as he spoke. ‘Try to rest; to-morrow will bring you counsel. I shall remember you both. God bless you!’ And then Ned joined him, and the two men went out silently together.

CHAPTER XVI

NELL

A loving heart is the great requirement.—*Teaching of Buddha.*

Let's find the sunny side of men—
Or be believers in it ;
A light there is in every soul
That takes the pains to win it.

ANON.

MORE than once during her long wakeful night Sheila thought of Luke Brett's valediction, and the strong warm grasp of his hand as they stood together in the dim starlight. He had said little—the vicar was a man who never wasted words—but his very silence had been eloquent. He was sorry for them—as far as lay in his power he was ready to help them—but it was his creed that preaching was most effective in the pulpit, and that sympathy was best translated into action.

There was an old motto that he loved, and which he had had illuminated on the wall over his study mantelpiece, *Durum frango patientia*—‘I break a hard thing with patience.’

‘I bain't afeerd of parson,’ an old labourer once said to Sheila ; ‘he don't terrify a body with shouting textesses at un ; he just takes up the poker and makes a flare, and says he, “My aunt must send

you something good for that cough, Robin, or we shall not be seeing you at our Christmas Eve Service." And,' says he, 'I bean't put my foot across the threshold of the church all the summer—and he never let fly at un; he knowed without telling that the rheumatics were in my boanes. Oh, he is a rare good sort, is parson.'

It was Luke Brett's belief that every back was fitted for its burthen—that trouble must be looked in the face and not shuffled into the background to scare and harass a man in his hours of weakness and depression. 'We must grapple with a difficulty,' he would say, 'or it will crush us in the end.' At the same time he was slow to speak words of consolation until the right time came. He was a man who had always kept his troubles to himself—who, in a world full of human beings, had dwelt alone. And yet no heart was truer to his fellow-creatures or more open to the appeals of suffering humanity.

There were hours, though no one knew it, when the problems and mysteries of life seemed to lie like a vast wall built up round him, that threatened to fall inward and engulf him in utter ruin. But overhead the stars were still glimmering. 'One must walk by faith in a dark world,' he said once. 'We human children cannot expect to solve enigmas that would baffle an archangel, so what is the use of trying? There will be plenty of time in eternity to decipher the hieroglyphics that have bewildered us here.' And so, when he had strengthened his hands and heart in that silent communion that never failed him, he went forth to help others.

Sheila found it somewhat difficult to rouse Ivor the next morning. He had slept the heavy sleep of exhaustion, and woke dazed and confused by his new

surroundings—until his eyes met Sheila's smile, and then he understood.


His feet were still extremely painful, and he made such slow progress with dressing that the fly was at the gate before he had half finished his breakfast. Sheila seemed distressed at this, but Ivor rose at once.

'I have done very well,' he said; 'that cup of coffee was meat and drink to me, and we must not lose the train.' And Sheila reluctantly acquiesced in this.

Ivor was very silent during the journey. He said his head ached. Sheila was painfully struck by the delicacy of his aspect. Years of privation had evidently told on his constitution, and it would be long before he would regain his normal strength. His dejection and air of lassitude appealed to her with irresistible force. He was evidently ill at ease, and when Ned had left them together for a few minutes, she took the opportunity of saying a word to him.

'What is it, dear?' she asked gently; 'you are troubling about something. Ned is good to you, is he not?'

'Oh, it is not that'—and Ivor frowned and pulled nervously at his moustache. 'He is far better to me than I deserve. But I am wondering what you will both say to Nell. She isn't your sort at all. What chance has she had?' he continued bitterly; 'her mother died before she was ten years old, and old Cobbe, though he was a decent chap in his way, wasn't exactly the sort of person to understand a girl. He did his best, but it was a roughish life. And when the children came, and she lost her health, she had a lot to bear, poor girl.'



Ivor spoke with real feeling ; Sheila wished Ned could have heard him. With all his faults and shortcomings, he was evidently loyal to the woman who was the mother of his children ; and though he had brought her almost to beggary, he was prepared to stand up for her before his relations.

‘She isn’t a bad sort really,’ he went on, ‘and after a time you’ll get used to her. She hasn’t recovered from nursing me on the voyage, and she rarely gets her night’s rest with Tom, poor little chap. He’s so fretful and ailing that he gives his mother a lot of trouble. She says her back is always aching ; I have seen her cry with the pain sometimes.’ And then, as Ned came back to them, Ivor limped away to the bookstall for a moment to recover himself.

Happily the journey was a short one, and they soon found themselves at Victoria, and then a cab conveyed them to their destination.

Juniper Place was not exactly a cheerful locality ; it consisted mainly of a row of dingy-looking houses, facing some railway arches, with a blank wall at the other end. The houses were high and narrow, and had areas, and were chiefly inhabited by the families of stokers and porters and navvies employed on the railway, the cheapness of the houses counterbalancing the confined view. To maternal eyes Juniper Place had its advantages, for on wet days the children used the archway end as their playground, where they could whoop and whistle and air their lungs in healthy freedom.

As Ned paid the cabman, a little group of urchins collected round him, and Sheila heard one little fellow say to another, ‘Ain’t he big, Jack ? That Goliath teacher told us about can’t be no bigger.’ But Jack was equal to the occasion.

‘He’s Fee-fo-fum, he is, what ketches and eats children ; so look out for yourself, Joey’ ; and at this alarming intelligence there was a scattering and sudden dispersion into the safe recesses of the railway arch.

‘Poor little things,’ sighed Sheila ; but Ivor only shrugged his shoulders and led the way into the house. ‘It is the top floor,’ he said in an undertone.

As they toiled up the last flight of narrow stairs they could hear a child crying. ‘That’s Tom—he is always at it,’ muttered Ivor. Then he opened the door for Sheila to enter. As she did so an unexpected sight met her eyes.

A little girl was pacing up and down the room with a small boy on her back, and bent nearly double under the weight. She was such a tiny dot of a child that she looked very little bigger than the boy she was carrying, and she had a sharp, thin little face and a crop of curly red hair. Ivor uttered an exclamation. ‘Bunnie, how often I have told you not to carry Tom like that ! Give him to me directly.’ Then the boy, with a fretful wail that went to Sheila’s heart, clutched his sister more tightly round the neck.

‘Bunnie is Tom’s gee-gee ; Tom’s having nice ride. Go away, dada. Gee-up, Bunnie !’ But the next minute he was in his father’s arms.

‘Don’t be a naughty boy, Tom ; I have brought a kind lady to see you.’ But Tom, with the waywardness of a sickly child, only buried his face in his father’s shoulder. ‘Don’t want no ladies,’ he muttered ; ‘Tommy wants a ride.’

‘Where is your mother, Bunnie ?’ Ivor’s voice sounded despairing. Tom was in one of his obstinate moods. Bunnie stood by her father and regarded them

both rather anxiously. The drops of perspiration stood on her pale little face.

‘Mother’s gone out for a drop of milk,’ she said in a curiously sharp little voice. ‘Tommy was bad in the night, and mother had to play horses with him. When he has the pain some one has to be his gee-gee, dad.’ Bunnie spoke with decision. Obedience was good, but necessity knows no law. If any one could have explained to Bunnie that she was contracting spinal disease by her misplaced devotion, she would not have budged from her point one inch. When the pain troubled him, some one had to suffer too, and even infantile backaches had to be endured.

‘Mother said she had the toothache in her back, and she could not play any more,’ continued Bunnie dejectedly. ‘And she was afraid I should spill the milk, and there was no more pennies, was there, Tom?’ Here there was a fresh wail from Tom.

Ned could not bear it any longer. He had been a silent witness in the background. The attic they were in had sloping walls, and he could only stand upright in the centre. It was clearly impossible to carry his nephew pickaback without knocking both their heads, but some primeval instinct made him drop on his hands and knees.

‘I will give Tommy a ride,’ he said suddenly, to Sheila’s astonishment; ‘put the little chap on my back, Ivor, and hold him on’; and the next moment Tommy’s fretful whine turned into a shout of glee as he felt his steed moving under him. He was rather a pretty little fellow, and he had his father’s fair hair and blue eyes, but he was terribly emaciated—a mere little bag of bones, as Ned said afterwards—but at that moment his joy was great.

‘Gee on, Man ; Tommy wants to go faster.’ And it was at this moment that the door opened, and a young woman with a little yellow jug in her hand stood transfixed with astonishment on the threshold.

Sheila was the first to see her, but before she could speak Ivor placed himself between them. ‘Nell,’ he said, ‘this is my sister Sheila. She and my brother have come to see you’ ; and he lifted off the protesting Tom, and Ned rose to his feet with a sigh of relief.

Nell gave him a frightened look as she shook hands with him—‘His head almost touched the ceiling,’ she said afterwards—but a glance at Sheila’s face seemed to reassure her.

‘I am glad to see you, Miss Lassiter,’ she said, trying to appear at her ease. ‘This is a poor place, but there are chairs enough, I think’—here she looked round the room rather doubtfully. ‘Why don’t you ask your sister to sit down, Ivor? Come to mother, Tommy, and she will give you some milk.’ And as the little fellow waddled towards her, Sheila saw the poor little legs were not straight.

Nell was clearly nervous as she ministered to her boy’s wants. It was an embarrassing moment for all of them, and Ivor’s face was flushed as he stooped over his wife’s chair.

‘Tommy seems more fretful than usual, Nell. He was tiring out poor Bunnie, so my brother was giving him a ride.’ Then Nell glanced up again at Ned.

She had pretty eyes and long dark lashes, but they were her only redeeming features. Perhaps, when she had been younger, she might have had some claims to good looks, but she was now a plain, sickly young woman. Her face was thin and drawn, as though with constant pain ; her hair, which had once been soft and

glossy, had grown thin too, and the straggling fringe gave her a slovenly appearance. The red dress that Nell had once thought so *chic* was frayed and faded, and the velvet with which it was trimmed was threadbare. The poor cheap finery, the wan face, the tired, anxious eyes, made Sheila's heart ache—it was all so common and tawdry, so indescribably pitiful; and yet there was womanly tenderness in the way she ministered to her suffering child.

'You take him, Ivey,' she said, when Tom had drunk his milk. 'He will be quieter now, and I am so tired, for I have been walking about with him since daybreak. Go to dada, Tommy.' But Tom objected; he had fresh wants, which only his mother could supply.

'Tom's hungry, and wants bread and dam, mummy.' Then Nell gave a hopeless sigh.

'There is nothing but a loaf in the cupboard, you might cut him a slice,' she whispered to her husband.

'Dam too, dada.' But Nell shook her head.

'There isn't a spoonful left,' she said; 'I scraped the pot yesterday'; and then she kissed the fair curls a little sadly. 'Tommy will eat his bread and not tease poor mummy any more; she has got to talk to the kind lady and gentleman.' But Tom had no intention of being good—he had begun the day badly; he opened his mouth for a roar, and Sheila felt it was time to make a diversion.

'We have brought some things with us,' she said. 'We shall all of us be glad of a little luncheon, for we had a hurried breakfast. Ned, if you will bring in the hamper, Mrs. Ivor will give us some plates.' Then Nell, colouring at hearing herself addressed in this formal fashion, sent Bunnie to fetch what was required.

In a few moments the table was covered with good things. Eppie, who had been up since daybreak packing the hamper, had almost emptied her mistress's larder. There was the leg of lamb from yesterday's dinner, and half a fowl, a piece of cold bacon, and the remains of a tongue, a cake, and several pots of jam, besides tea, sugar, and other useful articles, which made Nell open her eyes. Tom positively chuckled with delight. 'There's dam,' he said, taking a moist thumb out of his mouth and pointing out the coveted dainty—'lots and lots of dam.'

Sheila made them all gather round the table, but neither she nor Ned felt they could touch a morsel. Ned cut a slice of cake for himself and Sheila, but his portion remained untouched.

'It took away my appetite to see that poor girl eating as though she hadn't tasted meat for a month,' he said afterwards to Sheila. 'I felt as though the cake would choke me. Ivor hardly ate anything either—he was too busy attending to Tom—so when we had done our business, we had a good square meal at Buszard's.'

When the little feast was over, Ned and Ivor left, and Tom, who was drowsy with repletion, consented to sit on his aunt's lap while Nell and Bunnie cleared the table and put things straight.

Sheila sat and watched them. She noticed Nell's slow, languid movements and frequent frown of pain; and she noticed, too, that Bunnie was her mother's willing little slave—that the tiny hands did more than their fair measure of work. It was 'Wipe those plates, Bunnie, and put them one by one in the cupboard'; or 'Just run down and ask Mrs. Jennings to let us boil our kettle at her fire; and then you can straighten Tommy's bed, for he is getting sleepy.'

‘Bunnie must be tired by this time, I should think,’ observed Sheila, when the child had been dispatched across the road for some matches, and Tommy was safely asleep in the other room. Then Nell, who had at last leisure to attend to her visitor, looked at her rather anxiously.

‘I hope you don’t think I put on Bunnie, Miss Lassiter?’ she said in a deprecatory voice.

‘Oh no,’ returned Sheila hastily. ‘But she is such a mite of a child, and she looks so pale and tired.’

‘She is such a willing little creature,’ returned Nell with a sigh, ‘and such a help to me in a hundred ways, that I sometimes forget she is only a baby too. She is as good as gold and always has been, and what I should do without her I don’t know. For when I am busy with the cooking or washing, she will amuse Tom for hours; for I have had to work hard since I married.’

‘I can well believe it,’ replied Sheila gently, her eyes resting on the thin roughened hands lying on Nell’s lap. ‘I am afraid you and Ivor have had a great deal of trouble.’ Then the slow tears of weakness coursed down Nell’s cheeks.

‘It has been terribly hard,’ she said in a hopeless voice. ‘I am afraid father was right when he said it was a judgment on me for marrying against his wishes. He told me that I should repent marrying Ivor. Not that he did not get on with him—for they were good friends in their way—but he never quite trusted him. But there, I was too fond of Ivor to listen to him; and he has made me a good husband.’ And the soft blue eyes brightened a little.

‘I am glad to hear you say that,’ returned Sheila warmly. ‘Nell—may I call you Nell?—I want you to

feel that we are friends, that Ned and I are anxious to give you both a helping hand, and to do what we can for you. We are not rich, but Ivor must work——’

‘He will do that willingly enough, poor fellow,’ replied Nell; ‘but they gave him the sack out there. Ivor always said that if he could only bring us to England, we should get on right enough. It was just our ill luck his getting that touch of fever again, for that threw us back. Would you believe it, Miss Lassiter, that Tommy’s milk was bought with our last penny? There was only a big loaf in the cupboard, and until to-day we had not tasted meat for weeks.’ Nell wiped away some more tears as she spoke. ‘I think father would turn in his grave if he knew all that I have been through. But there, it is done and can’t be undone, and I am not so sure I repent it even now’—and a faint tinge of colour came to her wan cheek.

Nell might be a common, rough colonial girl, but she was a patient creature for all that. Years of poverty and struggle and ill-health had not made her repent her hasty marriage; with all his faults, Ivor was the man she loved, the father of her children, and Nell had never faltered in her loyalty and devotion. She had taken him for better or for worse, and she must dree her weird like other women.

CHAPTER XVII

NELL TELLS HER STORY

Poverty is the only load which is the heavier the more loved ones there are to assist in supporting it. —RICHTER.

And out of darkness came the hands
That reach thro' nature, moulding men.
In Memoriam.

NELL lost her shyness when she found herself alone with Sheila, and seemed more disposed to be communicative. Probably Sheila's gentleness of manner gave her confidence, and before long a few judicious and timely questions on her sister-in-law's part drew from her the whole history of her first acquaintance with Ivor.

Bunnie had long ago returned from her errand, and seeing her mother engaged, had crept noiselessly away. An hour later they found her on Tommy's bed fast asleep, with her head on the same pillow. Nell looked very lovingly at the flushed little face and tangled curls. 'I mustn't forget that she is only a baby,' she said half to herself, but Sheila heard her.

Nell told her story in homely language.

'I never had much schooling,' she explained apologetically; 'father spoilt me, and I had my own way too much, and even as a child I was never over strong,

and I played truant most fine days. I am afraid the little I know has been taught me by Ivor. I never was one for books. I could do a sum and add up figures as well as most of the girls at the Store, but I did not care for reading and going to lectures as some of them did. In the evening I was too tired for anything ; my feet and back ached with standing so long, and I often fell asleep over my mending, and then father would tell me to put it away and go to bed.'

'You and Ivor were in the same Store, he told me.'

'Yes, but he was in the office, and of course I never saw him there ; it was quite by accident that we met. A tipsy man was following me, and I was so frightened that I went up to a young man who seemed going my way and asked him to protect me. Father said it was a risky thing to do ; but I saw he was a gentleman and he had a nice face, and no one could have been kinder. He walked with me to the very door, talking all the time as pleasantly as possible. The next evening I saw him again, and he stopped and asked me if I had got over my fright ; it was then that I found out that he had a situation in the same Store, and that he lodged at a house a little higher up the road.

"I pass your place every evening," he said ; "so, if you like, I can walk home with you ; the road's a bit lonely after dark." And as I was rather timid—though I would not own it to father, for it would have made him uneasy—I was glad enough to accept this offer. I could see it was just good-nature on Ivor's part, not that he cared about walking with me. He said afterwards that he had hardly looked at me, and that he would have done the same for any one. Somehow his manner made it easy for me, and though I said nothing about it to father for a week or two, I

began to look forward to my evening walk and think it the best part of the day.'

Sheila smiled.

'We got quite friendly after a time, and Ivor told me a lot about himself, and how lonely he was, and how he hated his work. "It is my own fault," he said once; "I have a good brother and sister in England, but I got sick of the life and wanted to see the world, so I took French leave one fine day. I can't say the office is much to my taste, but I have to earn my bread and cheese, so I must hang on for a bit." And then he told me how lonely and homesick he was; but it was not until after we were married that I found out that he had broken with his people.'

'That was the saddest part of all, Nell; it was cruel to leave us in such anxiety when we loved him so.'

'I think he was just ashamed of himself,' returned Nell, 'and that he could not bring himself to own it. When things were very bad once, I wanted him to write and ask you to help us, but he was quite angry with me. "They have not got more than enough for themselves," he said; "Ned works from morning to night, and Sheila too, and they deprive themselves of everything but absolute necessities. No, I won't write, Nell; I would starve rather than do it"; and seeing him in this mood I daren't say any more.'

'Ah, if you had only written!' Then Nell gave her a quick look.

'I would have done it in spite of Ivor if I could have found the address,' she returned. 'It was when dear Ned and Willie were ill, and my heart was just breaking. Father did all he could for us, but we had no money to move them into the country, though the doctor said that might have saved them. I

was nearly out of my mind when they told me Ned was dying ; he had always been so strong and hearty, and Ivor was so proud of him. Oh, I was wicked that day, but I don't think God will cast it up against me. I know I prayed that I might die too ; for Ned heard me and slipped his hot little hand in mine—it seemed to burn me through and through.

““You come too, mother,” he whispered, for his poor little throat was sore ; “there are lots of flowers there, and the harps will sound so pretty”—those were his last words. When they had carried him and Willie to the cemetery it seemed to me there was nothing more to live for. And then Tommy was born, and I had to do the best I could for him and Bunny——’

‘And for Ivor.’

‘Yes. Ivor was always good to us, but when father died, and he lost his berth, his courage seemed to fail him. The fever was on him too, though we did not know it until we were on board. Oh, that voyage ! But for Sam Bell giving me a helping hand with the children, I think I should have died.’

‘Poor Nell—poor girl !’ murmured Sheila softly.

‘You would have pitied me then, Miss Lassiter. Many a night I could have screamed with the pain in my back, and I could not lie down for more than half-an-hour at a time—for how could I rest with him moaning in misery ! There were times when he was light-headed, and I dare not leave him ; it was then that he would talk of you and your brother. Sometimes he would beg me to send for you. “Sheila is such a famous nurse,” he would say ; “she always makes a fellow comfortable. She would know what to do for this pain, Nell ; she has such nice hands, they are not rough and hard.” I used to cry when Ivor said these

kind of things, but of course he did not know what he was saying ; but it was a cruel time'—and Nell's face grew haggard with the recollection.

Sheila would not let her talk any more ; they were both tired, she said, and a cup of tea would do them good. Nell was to sit still while she got it ready. But Nell refused to do this ; she must go down to the basement, she said, and fetch the kettle of boiling water, and beg one of the little Jennings to get her some milk. So Sheila contented herself with arranging the tea-cups and cutting a plentiful supply of bread and butter.

By the time they had finished their tea Ned and Ivor returned. They both looked hot and fagged, and were laden with brown paper parcels. Ned opened his triumphantly. One of them contained a handsome horse covered with real skin, and was evidently an expensive toy ; and the other was a baby doll very prettily dressed, lying in a cot.

Sheila, who was somewhat shocked at this extravagance, thought it better to reserve her lecture until afterwards.

Ned was evidently pleased with himself. He was much disappointed when he heard the children were asleep, and that Nell thought it wiser not to wake them. Tommy would wake up cross and fretful, she said, and very likely he would be so excited when he saw his toy that there would be little sleep for any of them that night.

'If you don't mind, Mr. Lassiter, I will hide them away in the cupboard until the morning. They are just beautiful'—and Nell's eyes quite sparkled with pleasure. 'Ivor gives them a penny toy now and then, but it soon gets broken. Tommy will be ready to

jump out of his skin with delight when he sees that horse.'

And she was right. Tom's ecstasy was too deep for words; for months to come he absolutely refused to be parted from his 'beauty gee-gee,' as he called it, and it was stabled on a chair every night beside his cot. As for Bunnie, when she pressed the new baby to her thin little bosom, her cup of bliss seemed full to the brim.

'I couldn't love it better if it speaked to me, mummy,' she said, as she sat on her little stool hugging her treasure. 'My baby is the dearest, beautifullest, darlingest, sweet thing, and I shall call her Susan Jemima Mary Anne 'cos she is so lovely.'

Ned and Sheila took their departure soon afterwards. Ned had given his brother some money for present expenses, and had promised soon to see him again. 'Sheila and I will have a talk about things and see what is to be done,' he had said, and Ivor had been quite satisfied to leave matters in his hands.

Sheila bade good-bye very kindly to Nell, though she did not kiss her—the time had not come for that. Sheila was not a demonstrative woman, and was always rather slow in making advances. Nell looked at her a little wistfully.

'You have done me good, Miss Lassiter,' she said gratefully.

And then Ivor accompanied them to the street door. 'You will come again soon, She?' he said pleadingly.

'Yes, oh yes,' she returned quickly, and then she put her arms round his neck and kissed him affectionately. There was a misty look in Ivor's eyes as he watched their retreating figures. 'God bless her, she is a good woman—she knows how to forgive!' he said to himself, and a warm sense of comfort and gratitude

stole into the young man's heart as he toiled slowly up the stairs again. To his surprise he found Nell having what she called a good cry, rather a luxury in her hard-working life.

'Don't scold me, Ivey,' she said tearfully, as he uttered an impatient exclamation; 'I am only crying because your sister was so good to me. She has such a sweet face, and if she had been my own sister she could not have been kinder to me. I could not help fretting a bit, because she must have thought me such a poor creature; I must have seemed so common and rough to her, and the children and I were in such a muddle.' But Ivor knew better than to let her go on. Nell was sensitive and had nerves, and she was suffering from the want of her night's rest; he made a diversion by telling her about his new outfit and the grand luncheon they had had.

'I am a bit lame still,' he said, and this aroused Nell's solicitude at once, and she insisted on pulling off the new boots herself. Nell wept afresh when she saw the poor feet, and quite forgot her own fatigue as she tenderly bathed them. If Ivor remembered a softer pair of hands that had ministered to him the previous day, he forbore to allude to it except by a casual word or two.

Nell was always a little jealous of her wifely prerogatives, and would allow of no interference with her monopoly. It would not have pleased her to listen to the story of the little Samaritan. Ivor, who understood her thoroughly, was well aware of this. 'The Miss Betty episode,' as he called it, was best buried in oblivion. Nell had had a jealous fit once or twice, and the remembrance was not pleasant to him.

Meanwhile Sheila was giving Ned the lecture that

he so richly deserved. The complex emotions of the day had exhausted her, and it gave her positive relief to speak her mind in her old fashion; to scold Ned in a bantering, half-serious manner was part of her day's work, and yielded her perpetual satisfaction. Sheila had a suspicion that Ned rather enjoyed it than otherwise. He would say sometimes 'that it was like sitting in a draught on a warm day, it gave him a breezy feeling'; for he was fond of an argument even when he knew that he was on the losing side.

'Ned, dear,' she said more seriously than usual, 'I don't want to find fault with you, but it was really wrong to throw away money on those expensive toys when Nell and the children are almost in rags.' Sheila certainly made a point here, but Ned would not admit it.

'I wanted to give them something that would last,' he said. 'Ivor did not wish me to buy them anything so good; he was quite distressed about it, so I sent him to the other end of the shop while I bought them. I don't repent one bit what I have done, She,' and Ned looked good-humouredly obstinate. 'That poor little chap is heavily handicapped; it is a satisfaction to do something that will give him pleasure.' And Ned gave a quick sigh as though the recollection oppressed him, and changed the subject by asking Sheila what she had made of Nell. 'She's not much to look at, poor thing,' he observed, 'and she has rather a common type of face, but she seems harmless and amiable, and she is certainly very fond of Ivor and the children.'

'Yes, she has her good points.' But Sheila refrained from adding how Nell's want of refinement and slow, drawling voice had oppressed her. 'It was difficult to

judge of her this afternoon,' she said hastily ; ' Tommy was harassing her so, and she was looking ill with fatigue and want of sleep. Considering the circumstances, she is rather better than we had a right to expect. With no mother and little education, she might have turned out much worse. There is nothing loud or flashy about her, and she is certainly unselfish and very affectionate. Did you notice what pretty eyes she has, Ned ? When any one says anything kind to her they look so soft and bright. She nearly made me cry once or twice when she talked about those poor boys who died '—and Sheila repeated the substance of Nell's words.

By and by, when they were in the train, Sheila broached a fresh subject. She told Ned that it would be best for her to go to Juniper Place alone next time.

' Ivor could stay with Tommy while Nell and I do our shopping,' she went on. ' I know you would wish me to get them all that is absolutely necessary '—and Ned nodded.

' You can have a free hand,' he said ; ' I have a good balance at the bank, and there is more coming in. Ivor has his outfit, and his wife and children must have suitable clothing. But there is more than that to settle, She,' and Ned frowned rather anxiously.

' Yes, dear, but not to-night.' Sheila spoke with quiet decision. ' I do not know how you feel, Ned, but my head is in a whirl and needs a night's rest.' But Ned's answer was conclusive.

' He wanted his pipe and nothing else in heaven and earth,' he asserted ; but Sheila smiled and let the exaggeration pass—she was only too thankful to be allowed to relapse into silence.

It was soothing to drive through the sweet summer

darkness, full of the fragrance of night-blowing flowers and the scent of newly-stacked hay. Sheila's throbbing head and pulses seemed stilled and rested, as though a healing hand had been placed on her temples. It was so still that she could hear the hooting of an owl in the distance. As they drove past the vicarage Sheila saw a tall dark figure pacing up the churchyard path. It was Luke Brett and Peter taking their accustomed prow. As the sound of wheels caught his ear, he turned round and waved his hand.

'So that is where Brett takes his evening walk,' muttered Ned. 'A new version of Harvey's *Meditations among the Tombs*. I wonder if he believes in ghosts. I am not fond of churchyards myself; the village green would be more to my taste'; and Sheila agreed with him.

The lonely figure rather haunted her. There was something suggestive of melancholy in those nocturnal rambles; but Luke would have denied this, for he loved the stillness and solitude of the hour. Down below in the village his people were sleeping, and round him lay the quiet dead resting from their labours. Above his head stretched the infinite, fathomless worlds of light and mystery, while shadowy footsteps of mighty presences seemed to encompass him. 'Their old men shall dream dreams, and their young men shall see visions,' he would say to himself; for at such times his very soul would be uplifted as though on eagle's wings, and the earth-garment would drop from him.

'Yes, they rest from their labours,' he would muse. 'What does it matter to them now that the work was hard and the fight so fierce that their hearts failed them, like their Master? They see now of the travail of

their soul, and are satisfied. Peace after battle ; but for me the battle is not yet ended. Night brings its own counsel, but each day is a new call to arms.' Then, as the pattering feet behind him ceased, Luke would rouse himself from his meditation, and look round to find Peter, patient and protesting, sitting on the gravel walk. 'Tired, Peter, and ready for bed?' and Luke lifted up the little animal and carried him in, while Peter licked his face in silent gratitude.

It was long past eleven before Ned and Sheila reached The Moorings. Eppie, who was somewhat scared by the lateness of the hour, was at the door watching for them. She had sandwiches and coffee ready in the dining-room. When they had finished their little repast, Sheila wished her brother good-night ; but Eppie followed her to her room on the pretext of helping her, and Sheila, who knew the old woman's anxiety, was obliged to narrate the day's experience.

'Oh, the puir, misguided laddie,' Eppie groaned ; 'he's made a sair bargain with a sickly, feckless sort of body like yon. But there, I will not be keeping you, my dawtie, for you are just dropping with fatigue. It is an awfu' business. It fairly sickens me to think of those puir bairns. This world is a weary place, but we must aye do our pairts' ; and Eppie sighed as she closed the door and left Sheila to her much-needed repose.

CHAPTER XVIII

‘YOU ARE MASTER. HERE’

The soul that is meekly honest must ever consider the simplest, the nearest duty to be the best of all things it can do.—MAETERLINCK.

‘THE night brings counsel,’ Luke Brett had said, and it was certainly true in Sheila’s case ; for, strange to say, although she had been too weary for consecutive thought the previous evening, and had slept like a tired child, she woke the next morning with a clear perception of the duty in hand. To a woman of Sheila’s nature, to see the right thing was immediately to try and do it in a straightforward, matter-of-fact way. The duty might be an unpleasant one, but not for that would she turn her back on it.

‘It is the best thing to do,’ she said to herself, ‘if only Ned will consent.’ Nevertheless, as she dressed herself, her heart felt strangely heavy. Outside the July sunshine was flooding the little common. She could hear the liquid notes of the lark as he soared into the blue ether ; a goat with her kid was browsing among the gorse bushes ; already the air was impregnated with the resinous smell of the pines. It was all so beautiful—God’s world !—how strange that hearts should ache and eyes grow dim with trouble on such a morning ! And then Sheila thought of Juniper

Place and the dark railway arches, and shuddered slightly.

She was a little silent during breakfast, and Ned peered at her once or twice rather curiously over the edge of his newspaper. But he said nothing until the meal was over and she took up her key-basket; then he put out his hand to stop her.

'Well, Sheila, I thought we were going to discuss matters this morning?'

'Yes, dear,' rather hurriedly; 'but Eppie is waiting for me now. I will come to you presently, when you have finished reading your paper.' Then Ned let her go; but he had finished his morning's pipe and was half through the debates before Sheila joined him.

'You don't look quite fit this morning, She,' he observed affectionately, as he put a chair for her. 'I feel rather as though I had been dragged through a mill-pond myself.' But Sheila only smiled at him and let this pass; her mind was too preoccupied to heed her own feelings.

'Ned, dear,' she said very seriously, 'I was too tired to talk or even to think last night, but this morning things seem clearer to me. When you asked what we were to do with those poor things, I could not answer you; but I see it now—we must bring them here.'

Ned looked at her aghast.

'Here! Do you mean to this house?'

'That is what I do mean certainly; but you are master here, and it is not for me to dictate to you.' Then Ned gave an impatient 'pshaw!' 'If you will listen to me a moment, dear,' she went on, 'I will try and explain what I really do mean. This house is large, and it is impossible for us to use all the rooms. There are those two large attics, and then that room at

the back of the dining-room opening into the conservatory. It is a little dull and low, but it would make a splendid day-nursery where Nell could sit and sew. I thought it all out when I was dressing. The children need never be in your way; Nell and I would take good care of that.'

'Good heavens!' and it was evident from Ned's disgusted face that such an idea had not occurred to him. 'Have you thought for a moment how it will spoil things? Just as we were so jolly and comfortable too! We have not had much pleasure in our lives, Sheila'; and Ned's reproachful tone was so full of bitterness that a lump came to Sheila's throat, and for a moment she could not speak.

'It would be a confounded nuisance having that woman here,' he continued. 'Couldn't they have a lodging near, or a cottage? There is one to let near the mill.'

'Yes, if you wish it, Ned. As I said, you are master, and this is your house, not mine.'

'Don't talk rot, Sheila'—Ned was becoming decidedly cross.

'I think you are misunderstanding me, dear,' returned Sheila gently. 'I never intended that they should live at The Moorings. Why, what nonsense, Ned!' as he stared at her. 'Do you suppose that you are to be saddled with a family for life? The idea is too preposterous for words. Oh, you foolish fellow, how could you think I meant that!' and Sheila slipped her hand affectionately into his arm.

'My good girl, will you tell me what you really do mean?' but Ned's tone was a trifle less crusty.

'I thought, if we could bring them here for a few months, I could take care of Nell and the children.'

Think what this air would do for them. And then our poor Ivor would have a chance of regaining his health. Ned, dear, I have thought it all out; it will be months before Ivor will be fit for work, and all that time you will have to keep them. It will cost less to have them here; and there are the rooms—they would not trouble you much. You could go up to town as you planned, and study at the British Museum, and leave them to me.'

'I shall do nothing of the kind!' indignantly. Then Ned's voice softened again as he saw her anxious face. 'When I proposed the plan I never thought all this was to come on me. I could not afford it, Sheila. I quite see that for a good many months to come I shall have practically to keep Ivor and his family; even when he gets a berth it will be years before he can make a decent income. I am sorry if I seem touchy and put out, She, but it needs the patience of Job to put up with the consequences of that boy's folly.' And Ned started up and began pacing the room impatiently, while Sheila watched him sadly. Her heart was full of pity for him. Her good dear Ned, that he should be so sorely tried! Oh, if he only knew how her heart ached for him!

Ned worked off his restlessness a little, and then he came back to her.

'Do you mean that you really wish this?' he asked. Sheila seemed a little distressed at the question.

'You must not ask me what I wish'—here her voice broke a little. 'I want nothing but to go on with this dear life—just we two. Oh, it was so peaceful and happy, Ned! And we have hardly been here two months—two months of such perfect enjoyment, and now it is to end.'

‘Must it end, She?’

‘I am afraid so, dear—at least for the present. There would be no real happiness for either of us if we refused to do what was right. If you prefer taking lodgings for them in the village, it shall be done, and I will not say another word about bringing them here. But they would not be so comfortable, and I could not look after them so well.’

‘Besides, it would cost more,’ returned Ned; ‘I think that is the chief point to consider. It would take a lot of money to run another establishment as well as this. I foresee doctor’s bills and endless expenses’—and Ned shrugged his shoulders in a hopeless way. ‘Well, my dear, I see the force of your argument, and we will make up our minds to give the thing a fair trial. Tell Ivor that he may bring them here for a time—better say a month or two—and we shall see how it works. After all, it will be worse for you than for me. You will have the lion’s share of the work.’

‘Dear Ned, it is so good of you to agree to my plan,’ and Sheila’s tone was full of gratitude; but Ned only gave a short laugh as he took up his paper again.

‘There, let me go out for a breath of air, the house feels stifling this morning. I suppose you mean to go up again to-morrow or the next day?’ Sheila nodded. ‘All right, you can settle it as you like, and I will promise not to grumble.’

Ned spoke in a cheery, resolute tone. Then, as he was about to leave the room, their eyes met, and Sheila’s were full of tears.

While Ned betook himself to the society of Mother Nature and ‘my Lady Nicotine,’ finding himself as usual soothed in temper and nerve, Sheila carried her work-basket to a shady corner of the tennis-

lawn. The fir parlour was not secluded enough for her present mood ; it was in full view of the gate and Sandy Lane, it was clearly impossible for any friendly-disposed neighbour not to drop in and join the little encampment—Betty and Miss Mowcher, or Martha, or even Miss Gillian, who was a frequent morning visitor, might invade her privacy at any moment. Sheila felt too depressed and weary to care for even Martha's society, although a very real friendship was growing up between them, and she felt that Betty's light-hearted chatter and repressed curiosity would be unbearable. Nevertheless, when a tall figure in clerical attire came down the grassy bank towards her, she was conscious of a feeling of involuntary pleasure.

'I hope I am not disturbing you,' he said, as they shook hands. 'Eppie told me that your brother was out and that I should find you here. You have chosen a pleasant little hermitage for yourself,' for Sheila sat in a sort of leafy bower, under a trellis-work arch, covered with clematis and Gloire de Dijon roses. 'May I sit down and talk to you a little, or would you rather be alone?'

'Oh no, I am very pleased to see you, Mr. Brett.' Sheila spoke with sincerity. Even at this early stage of their acquaintance she had found out that Luke Brett's society was always congenial to her—that somehow he never jarred on any mood. But as he sat down beside her his expression was graver than usual. He was accustomed to read faces, and Sheila's air of deep depression was not lost on him. The clear soft eyes had a troubled look in them.

'I saw you pass last night,' he said quietly. 'Did you hear Peter bark? You were very late, so I am afraid you had a hard day's work.'

‘Yes, it was hard,’ she returned with a sigh. ‘I suppose most people have to live through these sort of gray days, when things seem a little hopeless.’

‘I imagine so’—Luke spoke with quiet sympathy. ‘But the worst is, such a day seems to age one; if we were to measure our life by feelings, some days would be equal to a year’s existence.’

‘I certainly feel older this morning, so I suppose you are right,’ returned Sheila with a faint smile.

‘Do you mind telling me about it?’ he asked gently. ‘I was thinking of you both so much yesterday.’ And then, as before, Sheila felt herself impelled to speak.

Briefly but graphically she sketched that little scene of the two children. Bunnie, a mere baby herself, staggering under the weight of her suffering little brother, and then the pale-faced mother with her tired eyes and worn cheeks. Luke listened to it all intently, but he asked no questions; he very seldom asked questions, people always told him what he wished to know—there was no need to spur the willing horse. Somehow, as Sheila talked, the weight on her heart seemed insensibly to lighten a little, and yet Luke had spoken no word. Perhaps, if people realised more the power of even silent sympathy in a great trouble, there would be fewer Job’s comforters. As Ruskin quaintly says, ‘Men will not open their hearts to us if we are to broil them on a thorn-fire.’

Before long Sheila found herself speaking of Nell in the frankest possible manner.

‘She is not quite impossible, you know,’ she said, and there was no dearth of womanly kindness in her tone. ‘She is very colonial, and her education was neglected, and she has had a hard life, poor thing, with weak health and ailing children. Did I tell you, Mr. Brett, that they have lost two boys?’

'No,' he returned quietly ; 'there was so little time to hear things the other night.' Then Sheila told him about the fever, and Nell's despair when her boys died.

'Poor woman,' was his sole comment. But not for worlds would he have uttered his thought aloud—that it was better it should be so, better for the little lads and for their parents too. 'Those whom the gods love die young,' says the wise heathen, and the Christian knows that the folded lamb is safest. Suffering infancy and crippled childhood always affected Luke Brett strongly ; but when he read the funeral service over a little child, a curious note of triumph always mingled with the vibrating tenderness of his voice. Miss Gillian, who, on principle, always attended funerals, was once so strongly impressed by this that she spoke to him afterwards.

'I was so sad at losing dear little Dick Sullivan,' she said, 'that I could not help crying at the service. Poor Mrs. Sullivan seemed quite broken-hearted—and no wonder, losing her only child—and yet your voice sounded almost cheerful, Luke.'

'Yes, I know ; but just then I was not thinking of her, but of Dick. He was such a sturdy, bright-eyed little rogue, and so full of life.'

'That makes it all the sadder, Luke.'

'Ah, there I differ from you, Aunt Gill,' and a strange smile came to Luke's face. 'He loved life so much, and endless days have been given him. Happy Dick, to have so short a fight, to be spared manhood with its possible failures, its pains and penalties, its falls and senile decay. If I had a dozen boys, Aunt Gill, and lost them all, however I might grieve, I could read the service over each one, and feel that God knew best for them and me too.'

But Miss Gillian only gave a little sniff and made no reply. When Luke was in certain moods, he said such extraordinary things. 'A dozen boys,' she said to herself rather crossly. 'Why, it is utter nonsense to make such a speech, and he telling me over and over again that nothing will induce him to marry, till I am fairly crazy with his wrong-headedness.' And Miss Gillian, who was devoted to her nephew, and always thought there was no one like him, shook her head rather sadly. If she worshipped Luke, he puzzled her sorely. How was an old gentlewoman of the Victorian period to comprehend the complex personality of the vicar of St. Jude's?

In spite of their short acquaintance, Sheila understood him better than Miss Gillian did, although the latter lived under his roof and cared for his outward comforts. Her perception was keener, and already she guessed intuitively that Luke Brett's life had a dark background; that, notwithstanding his devotion to duty and his absorption in his pastoral work, he was not altogether a happy man. She once hinted this to Ned, when they were returning from an evening visit to the vicarage.

'He seems to me so lonely,' she said. 'Miss Gillian is an old dear, and she is as nice and amusing as possible, but she can hardly be a companion for a man like Mr. Brett.'

'Well, she mothers him, and he is very much attached to her,' replied Ned. 'But I know what you mean, Sheila. They are not quite on the same plane. It is rather like an eagle and a plump partridge trying to keep house together. He soars miles above her.' Then Sheila laughed at this droll conceit; but Ned went on with his subject.

'Brett is a good fellow, but he is a survival of the medieval ascetic in nineteenth-century dress. I told him only the other day, when we were arguing about something, that he would have made a splendid monk.'

'And what did he say, Ned?' Somehow the idea was repellent to Sheila, and yet how well she could imagine Luke Brett's dark, ascetic-looking face under the monk's cowl.

'Well, he did not exactly deny it. He gave that dry low laugh of his, as though he were amused, and remarked that, though a conventual life might suit him in some respects, he would find it impossible to yield an unreasoning obedience to any authority. "I must always reserve my right of private judgment, Lassiter," he said; and of course I told him he was right. In my opinion a monk is hardly a man—at least there is a blend of the old woman about him.' For on these subjects Ned was apt to express himself rather strongly, being somewhat pugnacious, after the fashion of John Bull.

When Sheila had finished her touching account of the death of Ivor's boys, there was a brief silence, which Mr. Brett was the first to break.

'And now, what do you mean to do?' he asked curtly; but he knew as well as possible what her answer would be.

'We shall bring them here,' she returned without a moment's hesitation; 'my brother and I have talked it over this morning, and we think it will be best. Of course we hope that it will be only for a few months, until Ivor regains his strength and is able to find a berth; but there seems nothing else to be done.'

'Are you sure of that?' he asked, looking at her intently.

‘Yes, I am quite sure,’ rather hastily; ‘and Edward has come round to my opinion. There is plenty of room for them all, and it will cost far less to have them here; and then I can look after poor Nell and the children. We are both afraid that there is something seriously wrong with the boy. I should make every possible arrangement for my brother’s comfort, that he should not be disturbed in any way.’ Then one of Luke’s rare smiles flitted across the dark face.

‘No, the burden would not be on your brother’s shoulders, Miss Lassiter,’ and Sheila coloured at his meaning tone.

‘Oh, I hope not,’ she said earnestly; ‘I want to spare him all I can, but of course it must spoil things for us both.’

‘Yes, I am afraid so.’ But Luke was saying to himself, ‘You are a good woman—a brave woman, Sheila Lassiter; and you will have your reward.’

‘We have been so happy together, we two,’ she went on rather sadly; ‘it was such a peaceful existence, and we had planned all sorts of delightful things for the winter, and now nothing will be carried out. We are not rich, Mr. Brett, and there will be heavy expenses, so it would never do to be extravagant. Somehow, I am afraid Ivor will always be a care to us, and yet in some ways he is improved.’

‘I hope so,’ returned Luke quietly. ‘Will you let me say just one word? You are doing the right thing—you are proposing to sacrifice leisure and comfort to your sense of duty. Do not weaken your strength by looking to the future, the day’s work is enough. Of all the Divine commands that are laid upon us, there is none more fitted to our human needs than

the Master's words: "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." And when he had said this, Luke Brett rose from his seat; but as he bade her good-bye there was a vivid brightness in his eyes that Sheila had never seen there before.

CHAPTER XIX

‘WE ARE SISTERS NOW’

We may, if we choose, make the worst of each other. Every one has his weak points ; every one has his faults : we may make the worst of these ; we may fix our attention constantly upon these. But we may also make the best of each other. By loving what is lovable in those round us, love will flow back to us, and life will become a pleasure instead of a pain, and earth will become heaven.—DEAN STANLEY.

WHEN Ned joined his sister at the luncheon table he was relieved to see that she had in some measure regained her quiet cheerfulness, and he listened with much interest to her account of the vicar’s visit, though he pretended to take umbrage when Sheila, with her customary frankness, told him that Mr. Brett had approved of their little plan.

‘Oh, I daresay,’ he remarked drily. ‘Isn’t it La Rochefoucauld who says that “we have all strength to support the misfortunes of others”?’

‘Come, come, that is hardly fair on Mr. Brett, Ned ; no one could have been more sympathetic.’

‘I remember he also observes that “it is far easier to be wise for others than to be wise for one’s self,” and that “nothing is given so profusely as advice.”’

But Sheila turned a deaf ear to this proverbial philosophy, in which Ned so much delighted, and changed the subject by asking him if he had come

across their friends from the Old Cottage. To her surprise Ned returned an affirmative answer. Kaiser, it appeared, had discovered the Woodford family snugly encamped in the hollow, and had conveyed the intelligence to his master.

'Kaiser barked so loudly that he attracted their attention,' went on Ned, 'so of course I was obliged to speak to them. Miss Woodford was sketching that little farmhouse on the hillside—she is quite an artist, I tell her—and Miss Bettina was reading the paper to her father, and they looked so uncommonly snug, that I joined them.'

'That was very pleasant, Ned.'

It never entered into Sheila's head to wonder why Ned was always coming across the Woodfords; he saw them far oftener than she did—indeed, he rarely returned from a walk without meeting one or other of them. The golf-links were their happy hunting-grounds, as Ned well knew, and as he rarely turned his steps in any other direction, it was a foregone conclusion that he would meet them. But Ned's perfect frankness on the subject forbade any *arrière pensée*.

'Mr. Woodford went home after a time,' continued Ned. 'The old gentleman has not been quite so well the last two days, and Miss Woodford seemed a little anxious about him. Miss Betty went with him. By the by, she sent her love to you, She.'

'And you stayed behind with Martha?' Sheila asked the question in all good faith, and Ned never turned a hair.

'Well, I thought it would be only decent to help her carry in her tackle; and as she did not object to my pipe, and it was hot for walking, I saw no good in shifting my quarters.'

‘I suppose you told her about yesterday?’ asked Sheila quietly.

‘Well, we were talking, you know, and it somehow came out in conversation ; and she was so very much interested, and was so extremely kind about the whole thing, that I could not help telling her.’

Then Sheila smiled, for she was much amused. Ned had once told her that Martha Woodford was one of the most intelligent women that he had ever met, and that he always found her a good listener. Probably he had done so on this occasion. But when she asked innocently what Martha had said to this, Ned declared that he could not remember.

‘She was awfully kind,’ he observed ; ‘but I believe that I talked so much myself, She, that Miss Woodford never got her innings.’ And Sheila laughed, for she knew that this was probably the case. Though Martha was no longer shy with him, she would very likely find no opportunity to put in a word ; and evidently this view of the subject seemed to strike Ned also.

‘I am afraid I talked an awful lot,’ he returned seriously, ‘but she did not seem bored. I remember one thing she said’—after a slight pause for recollection—‘that you were sure to do the kindest thing for everybody, and that you would certainly not spare yourself, or words to that effect ; and of course I endorsed this, and said what a regular brick you were.’

‘Thank you, dear ; that was very nice of you and Martha too.’ And then Sheila reflected for a moment. If Ned had given his version, there would be no need for explanations on her part ; but still it would be only kind to run in for a few minutes on her way back from the village. Martha and Betty too had shown such good taste in leaving her alone that

day, and somehow she yearned for Martha's gentle sympathy.

'I am going down to Wheeler's after tea,' she observed presently, when they rose from the table—'I want to get some Bovril and other little things for Tommy ; and I will call in at the Cottage when I come back. I must go by the early train, of course, Ned, for the days are so hot now. I have written a line to Ivor to tell him that I shall be with them soon after eleven, and to ask Nell to be ready for me.'

'All right. I shall be at the station in the evening to meet you,' was Ned's reply ; and then Sheila went off to make out her list for the next day's shopping.

The outer door of the Old Cottage was always open in summer time, and Sheila, as usual, went in unannounced when she paid her evening visit. She found Martha alone in the verandah, sorting rose leaves for her pot-pourri jar ; as she moved quickly to greet Sheila, her path was strewn with pink and white blossoms.

'Dear Sheila, it is so good of you to come'—and Martha's quiet kiss conveyed a world of welcome. 'I am alone, you see. Father is so tired that he has gone to his room ; the heat tries him sadly. Betty is sitting with him for a little, but she will soon come down.'

'It is rather a treat to have you to myself, Martha ; but I must not stay long, as I have another journey before me to-morrow.'

'Yes, I know—your brother told me' ; and Martha looked at her wistfully. 'I hope you understood why I would not intrude to-day. Betty begged so hard to run in for a moment, but I would not let her. I knew you would rather be quiet' ; and Sheila could not deny this.

‘Bee was quite huffy with me,’ went on Martha smiling, and Sheila thought she had never seen her look so well. She had more colour than usual, probably from the heat, but it certainly suited her. The sweetness of her expression often made people forget her plainness, but this evening there was a softness and animation about her that was certainly attractive.

‘Dear little Betty!’ observed Sheila; ‘but all the same I was not in a mood for her chatter. And then the vicar called while Ned was out, and as he could not see him, he talked to me.’

‘Oh, I am so glad; there is no one like Mr. Brett when one is in trouble—he seems to understand everything without being told.’

‘Yes; he was very kind, and he certainly did me good. Martha, I know that Ned told you about things, so there is no need to repeat them.’ Then Martha coloured a little, as though she were slightly embarrassed.

‘It was very good of him,’ she returned hurriedly. ‘I would not have questioned him for the world. I just asked after you, Sheila, and hoped you were not tired; but I should not have said a word about your poor brother, until Mr. Lassiter began to talk about him quite naturally, and of course I was glad enough to let him go on.’

‘Ned says you are a good listener, Martha.’ Then again a little flush came to Martha’s cheek; she was evidently rather sensitive on the subject of Mr. Lassiter’s confidence.

‘I think it was so kind of him,’ she returned rather nervously; ‘but I hope you do not mind my knowing, Sheila?’ Then Sheila assured her with absolute

sincerity that she was too thankful that Ned had anticipated her.

'I own I was a little surprised,' she said truthfully ; 'for, though Ned is a great talker when he finds himself in congenial society, he is generally extremely reticent on private matters. You may take it, therefore, as a great compliment that he thought you such a safe confidante. I expect if Betty had been there he would not have said a word.'

'Oh, do you think so?' and Martha looked rather shy and excessively pleased. 'I assure you he and Betty are excellent friends. Why, the naughty child actually calls him "Herr Professor" to his face.'

'Yes, and Ned is quite proud of the name. It is no use your being shocked, Martha, for they are both incorrigible, and Ned never will realise that Betty is quite grown-up.'

'I cannot wonder at it; but it is no use my lecturing Betty in private when you both encourage her in her childish ways——' but here she checked herself and changed the subject. 'And so you are going on your errand of mercy to-morrow, Sheila?'

'I am going to shop for Nell and the children,' returned Sheila resolutely. And then, the ice once broken, the two friends talked together of the impending change at The Moorings; and Sheila's troubled heart was soothed by another assurance that she was doing the right thing.

'I am so glad you think so,' she returned with a sigh.

'Yes indeed,' was Martha's reply. 'But you do not need to be told how sorry I am for you and your brother. I am afraid, from his description of your sister-in-law, that you will both have much to bear; and then those poor children!'

‘Duty and pleasure are not always synonymous terms,’ observed Sheila, trying to smile. ‘How strangely one’s prayers are answered sometimes, Martha. How many hundreds of nights I have offered up a petition that I might see my darling Ivor’s face again, and now my request has been granted, and the dear fellow has actually slept under our roof, and yet there was more heartache than pleasure. How could I rejoice when I knew all this burden was to come on Ned!’

‘I understand your feelings so well, dearest.’

‘It was the drop of gall that spoiled the sweetness of the draught. All these years I have thought more of Ned’s comfort and happiness than of my own. There is nothing praiseworthy in this, for you know what we are to each other.’

‘Yes, I know, Sheila.’

‘Ah, but you do not know the life that we led in Brook Street. How, day after day and week after week, no friendly footstep crossed our threshold. How absolutely we lived for our work and for each other. To me the worst of our poverty was that it seemed to shut us out from human fellowship. People who tried to be kind to us would not understand when we refused their invitations. They were only offended, and let us go. I used to cry about it sometimes, Martha. It did seem so hard that a clever man like Ned should be deprived of congenial society. If only he would have gone without me; but he always said that we would swim or sink together.’

‘I am not so sure you were to be pitied, dear,’ returned her friend quietly. ‘I have always so longed for an elder brother with whom I could take counsel. If our dear boys had only lived’—with a sigh of tender regret.

'No, you are right. As long as I have Ned and know all is well with Ivor, I have cause enough for thankfulness——' But Sheila never finished her sentence, for the next moment there was a little whirlwind, and she found herself enveloped in clouds of pink muslin, while a soft flushed cheek was pressed against hers.

'Oh, you dear thing—you dear thing,' exclaimed Betty rapturously, 'to think I never knew you were here, and Marty has had you all to herself!'

Martha and Sheila exchanged guilty looks. They felt rather like two conspirators who had been found out. It was seldom that they found an opportunity for a quiet talk. Betty never could be made to understand that her presence was not absolutely necessary. She insisted on a monopoly of Sheila's society. 'I knew her before you did, Marty,' she would say in rather an injured voice. 'Oh yes, she is your friend too; but all the same, I shall always feel that she and Herr Professor are my special property.' And Betty certainly acted up to her words, and Sheila was too fond of the child to damp her girlish enthusiasm. As for Ned, he talked to Martha and teased Betty, and had rather a good time on the whole.

Sheila could not stay any longer, but Betty, who was determined to have her innings, went with her to the gate of The Moorings. 'I hope your brother—Mr. Ivor, I mean—is better?' she asked rather shyly. 'I know what the Herr Professor told Marty this morning, that he has a wife and two dear little children, and I know how good you will be to them.'

'Somebody else was good too,' returned Sheila, taking the girl's hand. 'Dear Betty, I was obliged to write to you that night. I felt so grateful to you for

your kindness to my poor Ivor. Now I must go in, dear, for I have a long day's work before me to-morrow'; and then Betty bade her a reluctant good-night.

It was all so tantalising, she thought. She did so long to hear more about that poor wife and those children. Betty hated to be on the outside of things. It was all so wonderfully interesting, like a little bit out of a novel. 'After all, it was I who found him,' thought Betty with unconscious egotism. 'He may be a sort of prodigal son, but he is a dear fellow for all that'; and tears came to Betty's eyes as she recalled the meeting of the brother and sister.

When Sheila reached Juniper Place the next morning she found Nell and Bunnie ready for her—Bunnie with her baby doll in her arms.

Already the place had a more cheerful aspect. Tommy was sitting on the floor at his father's feet with his new toy—his face beaming. Nell had evidently taken pains with herself and Bunnie, and though their attire was woefully shabby, they had lost their slatternly appearance. Nell had curled the feather in her hat and mended her one pair of gloves, and the little flush of excitement on her cheek rather became her.

Sheila had already made out a list of things that would be absolutely necessary for Nell and the children, and as there was much to do she hurried them off, after exchanging a few words with Ivor.

At first Nell was too much subdued by the grandeur of the shops and the smart appearance of the assistants to dare to assert herself. But after a time, when she grew more used to her position, her natural love of finery was too much for her. Sheila had made up her mind to provide three useful dresses for Nell to

wear at The Moorings. And Nell, who had at first expressed her gratitude, and intention of leaving the choice to Sheila, could not refrain from hinting that she had a fancy for bright colours. She looked longingly at a red costume braided with black; then a pale green one took her fancy. But Sheila turned a deaf ear to these hints. The dark gray summer tweed with the spotted silk vest would suit her far better, and the blue serge would be more useful and becoming. Nell only got her way in the sateen that was for daily use, and she was wise enough to select a navy blue, though the white braiding was not to Sheila's taste.

Sheila was glad when they left this department, though a fresh difficulty arose with the hats. Nell would have fixed on one trimmed with crimson roses, or a white straw loaded with blue feathers, which would have overshadowed her thin little face. But Sheila was resolute. Nell should not disfigure herself, she said. The pretty black hat with the touch of gray in it suited her exactly; and the plain sailor straw hat with a blue ribbon would do for everyday. Nell looked disappointed, but she dared not rebel. And Sheila, pleased with her submission, added a smart lace tie and a pretty pink silk bow, which brought back Nell's smile again.

They had a hasty luncheon at a confectioner's, and then resumed their shopping. There were shoes and boots required for Nell and the children, and a jacket for cool days. They were almost worn out by the time they returned to Juniper Place. Ivor, who had been wondering at their long absence, had got tea ready; and Tommy, who had been clamouring for his mother the last hour or two, climbed up in her lap.

Nell gave an account of their purchases as they sat at the tea-table, while Tommy played with a box of soldiers that Sheila had brought him.

‘I shan’t know myself, Ivey,’ Nell said rather tearfully; ‘and you won’t have to be ashamed of me or Bunnie either when you put on your new suit. And to think of the rags I have been wearing.’ And Nell sighed as if she were almost oppressed with her riches. But even the glories of her new wardrobe paled before the prospect that opened before her dazzled eyes when Sheila gave Ned’s message to his brother.

Ivor seemed scarcely able to believe his ears.

‘I am to bring Nell and the children to The Moorings,’ he asked breathlessly—‘did you say for a month or two, Sheila?’

‘Yes, dear, those were Ned’s words. We both think that the fine air will do you all good. And then when you are stronger, Ivor, you will be able to look about you and find something to do.’

‘But we shall be in your way’—Ivor spoke in a tone of compunction. ‘It is awfully good of you both, but I don’t deserve this kindness; you are heaping coals of fire on me. And, hang it all, how am I to repay it?’ and Ivor walked to the window to hide his emotion. But after a minute or two Sheila followed him. Nell was quietly crying for sheer happiness.

‘Dear Ivor,’ she said gently, ‘we both know how good Ned is—few brothers would be so forgiving and generous—but it is in your power to pay him back.’

‘But I feel such a cad, She. I have no right to burden Ned or you either. Nell is a stranger to you; she has not been used to your ways.’ But here Sheila’s soft hand was laid on his lips.

‘Not another word, darling,’ she said firmly; ‘you

are all coming to The Moorings for a long and pleasant visit, I hope.' And then she quietly told them of the arrangements she intended to make for their comfort. The large pleasant attics, with their cheerful outlook, and the little back room that was so cool and shady in summer, and that opened on the tiny conservatory.

'It is a mere cottage room and belongs to the old part,' she went on, 'and had been used in Aunt Sarah's time as a servants' sitting-room, but Eppie prefers her kitchen. Nell could do her sewing there and look after the children, and on fine days they would be in the garden and on the golf-links. Ned will have his study. Nothing must disturb his work. It is I who will look after Nell and the children,' proceeded Sheila in her kind, frank way, as she looked at the pale, excited faces round her.

Then Nell did an unexpected thing. She let Tommy slide to the floor, upsetting the little army of tin soldiers who were marching to the victory, and gave her sister-in-law an impulsive hug.

'Oh, how I love you for this, Miss Lassiter!' she said in a broken voice.

Then, as Sheila warmly returned her kiss, her good heart prompted her to say: 'We are sisters now, Nell, and you must call me Sheila.' And then they all quieted down, and after a little more talk Sheila took her leave.

CHAPTER XX

‘A VERY HEALTHY-MINDED PERSON’

Success and happiness are only to be had in giving up our own will.—
GENERAL GORDON.

God has furnished us with constant occasions of bearing one another's burdens. For there is no man living without his failings ; no man that is so happy as never to give offence ; no man without his load of trouble.—
ANON.

THE busy traffic of the streets made it impossible for Sheila to time her arrival at Victoria with any degree of exactitude. She found herself therefore far too early for her train.

In spite of the lateness of the hour, for it was nearly eight, the station was somewhat crowded with passengers and luggage, and Sheila, who was tired out with her day's exertions, was looking vainly for a seat, when a deep voice behind her made her start. ‘I think I can secure a quiet corner for you, Miss Lassiter’ ; and Sheila turned to find herself face to face with the vicar of St. Jude's. As she stretched out her hand to him with a look of frank pleasure, her smile was reflected on Luke Brett's dark countenance.

‘I had a telegram this morning that obliged me to come up to town,’ he explained, as they walked across the crowded space towards the corner he had indicated.

'An old college friend whom I have not seen for some years was passing through London, and begged me to join him at the Club. We have been together until an hour ago. I had a sort of impression that you would take this train. I think you told me that your brother intended to meet you at Uplands ; if so, I am sure you will be good enough to give me a seat in your fly.'

'Need you ask such a question?' returned Sheila, with one of her sunny smiles. What had become of her fatigue and lassitude? Her step was as springy as ever, and there was no expression of disappointment on her face when, on reaching the seat, they found it occupied by a fat German and his substantial-looking spouse.

'I am afraid we must beat a retreat,' observed Mr. Brett regretfully ; 'all the world and his wife seem abroad this evening, and there is not another seat to be had unless you like to go into the waiting-room.'

'Oh no,' returned Sheila, 'it is so much cooler out here, and we shall not have long to wait now. You must have enjoyed seeing your old friend again, Mr. Brett.'

'It was a very real pleasure. Isn't it Longfellow who says, "How good it feels, the hand of an old friend"?''

'Yes, I think so.'

'And Shakespeare bids us "keep thy friend under thy own life's key." They were both right, Miss Lassiter. A new friend may in time become a very dear friend, but as one goes on in life, one yearns more and more for those old companions of one's earliest years ; school and college friendships, somehow they seem to mean so much even now.'

'My brother would agree with you there,' returned Sheila ; 'he often tells me that even during that short

time he was at Oxford he made the beginnings of at least a dozen friendships, although they were broken off by his being obliged to leave so suddenly. Poor fellow, he had only just begun to enjoy the delights of university life when our grandfather's death obliged him to give it up.'

'Yes, we have talked about it more than once,' replied Mr. Brett; 'it was one of those lost opportunities that can never return in later life. In the old myth they put Pegasus to the plough; there is a world of meaning in that. But I have a great faith in the law of compensation. I have a notion somehow that your brother may have gained as much as he has lost. There are wonderful lessons taught by the discipline of life. Ah, there the gate is open, and we shall be able to take our seats at once.'

The train was a long one, and to their surprise they had the compartment to themselves. This made conversation possible, and Luke at once took the opportunity of asking Sheila how her day's work had progressed.

'It was rather trying,' she returned. 'My sister-in-law's notions of dress are somewhat crude and undeveloped.' And then she gave Luke Brett rather an amusing sketch of Nell's yearning to crown her little white face with a fine structure of poppies or rosebuds, or wistfully regarding herself under the nodding blue plumes. 'I had to be firm,' she said smiling, 'and to put my foot down, but I am afraid, poor thing, she imagined me unnecessarily cruel; but I thought of Ned and steeled myself against all wistful looks. Oh, you may laugh, Mr. Brett, but I assure you there were weak moments when I was tempted to yield; it was so pathetic to me, that longing for a bit of

colour and smartness to bring brightness into her dingy life ; but I am glad now that I was firm.'

'I think you were right,' observed Mr. Brett. 'But it has often amused me to see how inherent that love of finery is in all classes and under all circumstances. The coster's young woman with her borrowed hat and feathers, the factory girl with her fringe and smart blouse, are at one end of the ladder, and the fashionable beauty, with her French milliner and dresses from Worth, is at the other. In the Old Testament days they seemed pretty much the same; "the king's daughter was all glorious within," Miss Lassiter.'

'Then you do not think it wrong?' asked Sheila, anxious, as usual, to know his opinion.

'Wrong—the love of finery, do you mean? Certainly not, within due limits, and if people dress in accordance with their station and means. I am not fond of bright plumage myself, and am rather Quakerish in my taste.' But as Luke Brett made this remark he glanced with decided approval at Sheila's soft gray dress and black hat. She would have been pleased if that secret criticism could have reached her ear, and still more if she had heard him remark to Miss Gillian that he wished a certain young Sunday School teacher would follow Miss Lassiter's example. 'She is always well dressed, but one never knows what she wears.' And though Miss Gillian privately agreed with him, she had been very contemptuous of this masculine verdict.

Sheila was talking out of sheer lightness of heart. She had done a troublesome piece of business, which had cost her much labour and a good deal of uneasiness. It had not been easy to manage Nell ; but patience and quiet perseverance had brought her

success. Nell would look a different creature when she was properly dressed. Sheila felt like a good child who had done some unusually difficult task, and was now let out of school. She was in holiday mood, and inclined to enjoy every moment of her return journey.

Not being given to introspection, she was quite unconscious of the reason why the presence of Luke Brett at once stimulated and rested her. But from the first it had been so, and at every meeting she became more at her ease with him ; and her heart had fully endorsed Martha Woodford's remark that 'there was no one like Mr. Brett when one was in trouble, for he seemed to understand everything without being told.'

More than once, as they talked, Luke Brett looked at her rather keenly. But it was not until the subject was exhausted that he gave utterance to his thought.

'Miss Lassiter, are you aware that you are a very healthy-minded person? Excuse me'—as Sheila coloured at this unexpected compliment—'I did not intend to be personal, only the fact struck me.'

'How do you mean?' she asked a little timidly.

'You have such recuperative power.' And then, of course, Sheila understood.

'Oh, I see now—you are thinking how different I was yesterday. But I am trying to make the best of things ; and'—very sweetly—'you do not know how much you helped me.' But he looked a little surprised at this.

'I had no idea you were a homœopathist, Miss Lassiter.' Then Sheila laughed.

'It was not so much what you said,' she remarked truthfully, 'as what you implied. But all the same you helped me.'

'*Deo gratias* for that.' And then he added drily, 'No doubt, believers in homœopathy swallow their minute globule in all good faith and with an honest belief in results.' And then his manner changed, and he said earnestly, 'I think that old saying contains a mine of truth, "Heaven helps those who help themselves." When you put self in the background, you were beginning to climb out of your low valley.' And then for a little time there was silence.

But by and by they began talking again; but Sheila never could remember what induced her to speak of her old life—it may have been some question or word on Mr. Brett's part—but she presently found herself talking to him of her parents and Ivor, of the ceaseless pressure of care that dominated the little household, of Ned's brave boyish struggles, and the sad limitations of their young life.

'It was a starved existence,' she said frankly. 'Do you know, I never had a friend of my own until I met Martha and Betty Woodford? I am very fond of them both, but I am most in touch with Martha.'

'I knew from the first you would be friends,' he replied quietly. 'Miss Woodford has a charming personality; she does not unfold at first to strangers, but when she once gives her friendship, she will never withdraw it. There ought to be a very real community of feeling between you, for you have both worn the yoke in your youth.'

'You are right,' returned Sheila in a low voice; and then two young women entered the compartment with babies and bundles, and by mutual consent the conversation lapsed.

It was during this pause of enforced silence that Sheila noticed with concern the air of extreme lassitude

and weariness with which Mr. Brett leant back in his corner. He had been talking with such animation, his manner had been so genuinely interested, that she had noticed nothing amiss ; but now there was a blueness about his lips, and he closed his eyes as though he were in pain.

Sheila watched him anxiously, but at first she did not venture to speak ; she had already found out that he was extremely reticent on the subject of his health, and never liked allusions to his looks. Miss Gillian had told her this.

‘Men are so perverse, my dear,’ she had remarked one day ; ‘they never will allow that anything is the matter with them—it is just their pride and masterful ways—and Luke, with all his good qualities, is no better than any of them. He knows he is not as robust as he used to be, and that his work tires him, but do you suppose he makes any difference for that? Not he. Every Sunday evening he comes back from service too jaded to eat his supper, but if I take any notice, he has a civil sort of way of bidding me hold my tongue.’

As Sheila remembered this speech, she remained silent. But Luke Brett could easily have explained matters—he always paid dearly for his pleasures. He had had an exceptionally happy day. He had enjoyed several hours of unrestrained intercourse with the friend of his youth, and had felt himself strengthened and refreshed ; and now there was this pleasant journey with the woman who already interested him, and to whom he felt himself drawn unconsciously. The hour had passed to him as agreeably as it had to Sheila, but as usual his physical powers had been unequal to the prolonged effort ; the old feelings of strain and

exhaustion were asserting themselves, and he knew that he must be quiet. Just then the train stopped, and he opened his eyes and met Sheila's anxious glance ; but the women and babies were getting out, and there was nothing said until the train moved on again.

'Don't look like that,' he said, smiling at her ; 'I am only a little tired.'

'But you are not well, I am sure of it. Is there nothing I can do?' But he shook his head.

'Please do not take any notice—I often have these fits of exhaustion ; besides, I am better now' ; and indeed his colour looked more natural. But by and by, as Sheila sat quiet in her corner, looking out at the darkening fields and hedgerows, he spoke again of his own accord.

'I am sorry I made you uneasy, but I have had a long day. Some time before I was ordained deacon, I had a serious boating accident, and that and the illness that followed told on my constitution. Until I was three-and-twenty I was as tough and strong as other men, with a passion for boating and all athletic sports, but I have to live more soberly now' ; and then, without waiting for her comment, he quietly passed on to another subject.

Soon afterwards they reached Uplands, and found Ned and Kaiser waiting on the platform. During their drive Mr. Brett talked in his usual manner. It was Sheila who was silent ; she found it impossible to divest herself of a vague uneasiness. She could not forget the sudden haggardness and pallor of Luke Brett's face, and the curious blueness of his lips ; and every time she woke that night she was haunted by the remembrance. But she said no word to Ned ; she had a feeling that Mr. Brett's confidence was intended

only for her ear, and she could not bring herself to repeat it. She wondered why Miss Gillian had not mentioned it, for she was extremely garrulous on family matters, and Sheila was already in possession of numberless biographical sketches of dead and gone Bretts—uncles and aunts and cousins with marvellous life-histories and incredible adventures and love-stories. Sheila knew all about Luke's mother, the dark-eyed Doreen, who had been Miss Gillian's sister and the darling of her heart, and had heard countless anecdotes of Luke's childhood.

'If I had not loved him for his mother's sake,' Miss Gillian said once, 'I should have done it for his own, for a more engaging child never lived ; and the queer speeches he would make too.

"Why can't I see my soul, Aunt Gill?" he said once to me. "I can feel it beating here like a little bird trying to fly." Dear, I can hear him now, and see him patting his little velvet tunic. Don't I remember the night when I was putting him into his little cot, and he asked me if people dressed and undressed in heaven ; "for it 'pears to me Aunt Gill," he said quite solemn like, though he could not speak plain, "that the wings must got dreffully in the way"; and then he flapped his arms as though to make believe he was flying. "I hope mine will fit," says he. Did you ever hear such a speech from a child of five? but there, Luke was the most knowing little fellow.'

Sheila was so tired when she reached home that Ned would not allow her to talk, and the narrative of the day's doings was left for the breakfast table. The night was hot and she could not sleep for hours, and she looked far from rested the next morning. But she would not allow Ned to condole with her.

'My dear old boy,' she said, 'any one but a salamander or a crocodile would have been fatigued walking the streets on such a day. The shops were stuffy and the dust seemed to get into one's throat.'

'You did far too much,' he remarked judicially; 'I cannot have you knocking yourself up after this fashion'—for her eyes were heavy from want of sleep.

'Oh, nonsense!' she returned with a sprightly air. 'Don't you know that I am a very healthy-minded person, and have such recuperative powers?' Then Ned stared at her, not being aware that she was repeating Luke Brett's speech.

'I tell you what, young woman,' he said, as he carried off the local paper for more leisurely perusal, 'you had better tuck yourself up in the hammock and have a nap.' And this advice was so tempting that Sheila actually took it.

'I am glad I followed your prescription, Ned,' she said, as she took her place at the luncheon table. 'I have wasted the whole morning dozing or sleeping. I have a fancy that Betty peeped at me through the gate, but I shut my eyes and lay quite still and she went away. And then a wood-pigeon cooed, and I had a sort of *Alice in Wonderland* dream; for I thought I had an immense feathery ruff round my neck. "I suppose I am a pigeon too—a Jacobin," I said to myself; "but it is rather odd that I can talk so well, and it is not pigeon-English either. I suppose when humans turn into birds they have wings; but mine won't flap nicely because they are only muslin." Oh, the absurdity of dreams, Ned!'

'They are utter rot,' he returned. But he was pleased all the same to hear her talk this nonsense; for her jaded look and heavy eyes had troubled him.

But Sheila was determined to prove the truth of Mr. Brett's speech, and as they sat at tea together in the fir parlour she was as cheerful as possible.

'We shall have a whole week to ourselves,' she remarked presently; 'Eppie says that we cannot get the rooms ready before that. A whole week—think of that, Ned! I mean to make the most of every minute.'

'A week,' he returned rather dubiously. 'In that case I am afraid that I shall be obliged to go up and see Ivor again.' But Sheila dissuaded him from this.

'There is not the slightest need,' she observed. 'I mean to write to him myself to-morrow, and to Nell too. He will have to get a neat black trunk for her and a Gladstone bag for himself. They could not really bring that battered tin box to The Moorings.'

'No, I suppose not. Do you think Ivor will know what to get?'

'Oh yes. There is a shop in Tottenham Court Road where there are very good trunks. I shall give him all particulars. Don't think of going up, Ned; it is far too hot. Besides, I can't part with you; we are going to be together every day this week. I mean to stick to you like an affectionate leech.'

'"Barkis is willin'," my dear.'

'We shall be quite gay next week,' she went on cheerfully. 'Surely you have not forgotten that Tuesday is Miss Gillian's birthday, and that she has invited us and the Woodfords to her last strawberry tea?'

'I think it had slipped my memory, She; that was the very day I meant to go to town.' Then she shook her head at him.

'And our picnic tea at Chorley Grange?' And again Ned had to plead defective memory.

Sheila pretended to be much offended. It was a little outdoor *fête* proposed for her special gratification. Mr. Brett had told them one evening that they certainly ought to see the beautiful grounds belonging to Chorley Grange. 'There is a cottage on the estate where you can get tea,' he had remarked. And Ned, who was always willing to give Sheila pleasure, had suggested that they should charter a waggonette and invite Miss Woodford and her sister to accompany them.

'I think we might ask Miss Gillian too,' remarked Sheila. Then Mr. Brett assured her that his aunt would gladly accept the invitation, as anything in the shape of a picnic or jaunt pleased her.

'I will give her your message,' he returned seriously, 'if you will promise to include me in the invitation.' And so a very pleasant little party had been arranged; and yet that tiresome Ned had forgotten all about it, and the waggonette was not even ordered.

'But what can you expect of a Herr Professor!' exclaimed Betty, when Sheila carried her story to the Cottage the next day. 'His head is so full of big thoughts that he has no room for little ones; but he might have remembered that Martha and I were going'—and Betty spoke in an injured voice.

CHAPTER XXI

MISS GILLIAN

But as we hurry on our way
And gird ourselves to run the race,
A moment still do we delay
For some loved face.

We scan some milestone where we met
A guide, a friend, a little child,
Whose loving eyes, remembered yet,
With blessing smiled.

ANNIE MATHESON.

AS Miss Gillian's birthday fell early in August, her invitation to a strawberry tea was somewhat puzzling, except to the initiated. To be sure, there were still a few late strawberries to be found in the sunny borders at the vicarage, but these were always kept for the vicar's benefit. But Miss Gillian, who was a notable house-keeper, prided herself upon her strawberry preserve; and a finely-cut old crystal bowl, full of the delicious delicacy, was always placed in the centre of her tea-table, the crimson fruit swimming in clear syrup.

'I have never tasted anything so good as Miss Gillian's strawberry preserve,' Martha had said to Sheila when the latter had remarked on the strangeness of the invitation, 'but I have never ventured to ask for the recipe.' And then she went on to explain a little

peculiarity on the old lady's part. Miss Gillian had a rooted aversion to receiving presents. Even on her birthday only her nephew was permitted to offer a gift. Flowers alone were acceptable. And then Martha related with a smile how she had once taken a pretty rustic basket of flowers to the vicarage in return for some kindness on Miss Gillian's part. The flowers had been admired and kept, but the basket had been sent back the next morning with a message of thanks. 'It was such a pity,' she went on, 'for I had arranged the flowers in wet moss, and they looked so lovely. But Miss Gillian declared she had no use for the basket.'

Sheila found this rather perplexing. She knew Miss Gillian had her idiosyncrasies, but this seemed rather ungracious, and she hinted as much to Martha. 'I suppose, in that case, she never gives presents herself?' she observed; but Martha assured her that no one was more lavish of gifts.

'She is the most recklessly generous person I know,' she went on. 'She has a nice little income of her own, and she is never happier than when she is spending her money on other people. She is the Lady Bountiful of the village, and Mr. Brett often remonstrates with her on her injudicious lavishness. He declares that she is quite pauperising the people.'

'If people give, they ought not to be too proud to receive,' returned Sheila.

'There is no pride in Miss Gillian's reluctance to accept presents, Sheila; indeed, it comes from a very different feeling. As it is no secret at Uplands, I may as well explain it to you. You know that Mrs. Brett was much younger than Miss Gillian—"her darling Doreen," as she always calls her—but you probably

do not know that Miss Gillian was engaged to the elder brother Cyril, who was also a clergyman.'

'No, I never heard that.'

'The Rev. Cyril Brett had a parish at the east end of London—Stepney or Whitechapel, I forget which—and the sisters were to have been married on the same day.'

'Oh dear, do you mean that my dear Miss Gillian was jilted?'

'No. Cyril Brett died two days before the wedding was to take place. He was a very zealous, hard-working man, and never grudged time or strength for his people. There was a terrible case of typhus in one of the courts, and the people were panic-stricken and would do nothing for the poor creatures. Cyril Brett was told of it, and he went at once, and stayed in the fever-stricken place amongst the dead and dying until help came. Then he went home, and the next day he sickened.'

'Oh, my poor Miss Gillian!'

'Yes, it was terribly tragical. Of course, she never saw him. There was no hope for him from the first—it was typhus in its most malignant form. Miss Gillian was stunned at first, but as soon as she could grasp things, she insisted that Doreen should be married on the day appointed; and then she said a very strange thing—and for the moment her sister thought that the shock had been too much for her brain—"There is no need for us all to be unhappy. Lionel has lost his brother, and he needs you to comfort him. You can go to church and be married quietly, and Cyril and I will be there too." But of course she meant in spirit, for she was far too feeble to rise from her bed for many a day. And when Doreen was not to be persuaded,

she actually sent for Lionel Brett, and he at once saw that nothing else would quiet her. Then, as soon as she was able to move, she had all her presents packed and sent back to the donors, and never from that day would she accept a gift except from her nearest and dearest.'

'But Miss Gillian is so cheerful and full of life, Martha, no one could have suspected that her life held such a tragedy.'

'You must remember, dear, that all this happened about forty years ago. Miss Gillian has had time to recover her spirits. But I can give you a proof that she has not forgotten her lover. On the anniversary of his death she always wears black, and takes a little bouquet of lilies of the valley—his favourite flower—to lay on his grave. And she does the same on the day her sister died. But as far as I know, she has never mentioned Cyril Brett's name to any one. It was an old servant of theirs who told me the story. She said once to me that two more beautiful girls than Gillian and Doreen Lorimer could not have been found in the United Kingdom, but that most people thought that Miss Gillian took the palm.'

'Of course, appearances are deceptive,' returned Sheila thoughtfully, 'but I should never have imagined that Miss Gillian had lived through such a sad experience.'

'It was sad enough,' observed Martha; 'and you see she has been faithful to his memory, "though lovers were thick as blackberries," as old Charlotte put it. There is heart-break in many women's lives, Sheila, but as far as I can judge, death is not the worst evil.'

'You mean that the pain would have been more unendurable if he had jilted her? I think you are right

there' ; and then Betty had interrupted them as usual, and there was no more said.

It was only natural that Martha's story should have interested Sheila. From the first she had been strongly attracted to Miss Gillian—in spite of her oddities and innocent egotism—she was such a staunch, courageous little creature, and so loyal to her friends. She thought very lovingly of her as she gathered her simple posy the next morning, and she answered Ned very gently when he scoffed at the homely gift.

'Martha and Betty always take flowers,' she said quietly—'they know Miss Gillian prefers it ; and Martha begged me to do the same.' And Ned held his tongue ; he was beginning to have a great respect for Miss Woodford's opinion.

On their arrival at the vicarage they found the other guests had arrived. Mr. Woodford was sitting in his wheeled chair under an acacia, and Mr. Brett was beside him. Martha was helping Miss Gillian arrange her tea-table, and Betty and Mr. Ducie, the curate, were playing bowls. The Rev. Howard Ducie had only recently come to St. Jude's. He was a pleasant-looking man—a noted cricketer—but Mr. Brett knew that he was a hard worker. Miss Gillian, who mothered all the curates, had invited him as a matter of course ; but she had told Betty not to flirt, as he was engaged to a nice girl who lived in Westmorland. But Betty had taken this hint in bad part.

'It is so absurd of Miss Gillian,' she observed rather crossly ; 'as though one cannot talk to a man without being accused of flirting!' But Martha had with difficulty suppressed a smile. She knew Betty could no more help making herself pleasant to a man than a honey-bee can help draining the sweetness of the

nectar cup in the heart of the flower. If she were a flirt, she was a most harmless and transparent one, and the gray-eyed girl who was waiting for Howard Ducie in the old manor-house at Kendal need not have feared Betty's winsome smiles and childish coquetry.

There was something idyllic in the little scene. The tea-table set in the shade of a gnarled old pear-tree; the picturesque little hostess with her fine old face beaming with smiles, and her lace lappets floating over her shoulders—she herself as light-footed and erect as a girl.

'I am seventy to-day,' she said as she kissed Sheila on both cheeks, 'and in some respects I am as young as my little Betty. Give Miss Lassiter a chair, Luke, and then you can wheel Mr. Woodford closer to the table. I see I have an uninvited guest,' as a wasp hovered round the crystal bowl. And then the little group gathered round their hostess, and Betty handed round the silver basket of thin crisp biscuits which were always served with the strawberry preserve.

It was always pleasant to Sheila to see Luke Brett with his aunt—his manner was so caressing and gentle to her; and though Miss Gillian teased and rallied him, and ordered him about as though he were still a boy, it was easy to read her pride and delight in him. Whether she understood him or not, their mutual attachment was evidently deep and sincere.

Peter, as usual, squatted closely beside his master, unless some intrusive sparrow had to be put to flight, and from time to time Luke drew the brown ears softly through his fingers. Sheila was relieved to see how much better and brighter he looked; but when she hinted at this, he shook his head a little reproachfully.

‘You have too good a memory, Miss Lassiter. I never remember my tired moods; they belong to yesterday.’ And then he continued, smiling, ‘What should we do if night were to be erased from our time-dial, and life were to be one long monotonous day—all sunshine, not even twilight?’

‘What a strange thought,’ observed Sheila in a low voice. The strawberry feast was over, and Mr. Brett had taken her to see the bee-hives; and then, as though by force of habit, he had unlatched the little gate leading to the churchyard, and presently they were pacing up and down the yew-tree walk, with the white headstones and crosses gleaming amidst the greenery.

‘Dr. Pusey once said something of the kind,’ returned the vicar. ‘I remember one sentence, “We can have no thought what we should lose if we could dispense with sleep, and prolong day into day by the loss of new beginnings. Every three years we have a thousand of such new beginnings.”’

‘Such an idea has never struck me before, but it is very true,’ and Sheila seemed impressed.

‘It helps us to preserve our sanity,’ observed Luke. ‘It is true that many of us sleep like worn-out pilgrims with our heads pillowed on our burdens. They are loosed, but we cannot get free from them. With morning comes fresh strength to bear them. By the by,’ changing the subject abruptly, as though he found his mood was too serious, ‘I hear from my aunt that we are to drive to Chorley Grange on Thursday.’

‘Yes indeed,’ returned Sheila brightly. ‘Ned and I are going to make the most of the week. I feel so proud giving my first picnic tea. On Saturday we mean to have a cycling trip—just Martha and Betty Woodford and Mr. Ducie. I heard Ned inviting him

at tea-time. And Miss Gillian is such a dear—she has promised to spend the afternoon with Mr. Woodford.'

'I wish I could join you,' returned Luke Brett a little wistfully; 'but cycling is a forbidden pleasure to me, and on Saturday I am always busy with my sermon. I suppose you will go to Deerhurst, and have luncheon at the Three Crows—it is the very ideal of a village inn.'

'Yes, and then we shall go on to Bovey Mill, and get tea at a farmhouse, and return by moonlight.' But as Sheila unfolded her little plan there was a regretful note in her voice. 'How pleasant it would have been,' she thought, 'if Mr. Brett could have joined us!' Perhaps Luke Brett read the unspoken thought, for he smiled.

'I have had my fair share of pleasant things,' he said quietly, 'and I must not complain if I sometimes have to be a looker-on at the game.'

But Sheila could make nothing of this enigmatical speech. She only felt that an element of pleasure would be lacking on the Saturday excursion. 'Anyhow, he is coming with us to Chorley,' she said to herself. 'I do hope we shall have a fine day.'

'Now what on earth can Aunt Gill be doing!' exclaimed Luke in a puzzled tone as they came in sight of the house. But they were soon to be enlightened. Miss Gillian, who was in an unusually lively mood, had challenged Betty to dance the minuet with her. And the little minx, who was proud of her dancing, had consented very willingly.

It was the prettiest and quaintest sight in the world to see Miss Gillian execute her old-fashioned curtseys. She swept the ground with billowy grace, and gave her hand with infinite dignity and condescension to her

partner. Betty's bird-like motions and girlish lightness were quite eclipsed by Miss Gillian with her stately pirouette and rhythmic walk. Miss Gillian's face was flushed, but she held her head high, and the diamonds on her soft little fingers twinkled and shone in the evening sunshine, and the lappets of her rare old point floated in the breeze. 'Bravo, Aunt Gill!' exclaimed Luke, clapping his hands. Then Miss Gillian, with a little toss of her head, executed her final curtsey.

'Ah, Betty mavoureen,' she said breathlessly, 'you can dance prettily, but you should just have seen my darling Doreen. Many and many a time, Luke, have we danced it on the bowling-green at Derrydown Lodge, with my father and mother to see us, and the dear dogs all sitting round and barking at us. And I am seventy years old to-day, and you will be calling me a vain old woman, Mr. Ducie. But, my dear, in some ways a woman never gets old. Now, as we have finished our dance, some one must be giving us a song.' But, after all, it was Miss Gillian who commenced the concert, and who sang 'Rich and rare were the gems she wore' in a voice that was very sweet and true.

It was almost dark when Miss Gillian's birthday party broke up, and quite a village crowd had collected in the churchyard to listen to the singing. Martha and Betty both had good voices, and Mr. Ducie had a fine bass. Even Luke Brett joined in the glees, though he could not be persuaded to undertake a solo. During the intervals they could hear the distant clapping of hands, for Hodge has distinctly musical taste.

'The furringers won't beat parson,' observed one old labourer. 'He has a terrible grand voice; I can feel it in my innards.' And more than one hearer would have endorsed this.

It was Martha Woodford who first made the move. Her father was tired with his unusual exertions, she said, and it was growing late. And then the little cavalcade set out, Ned propelling the old man's chair, Martha walking beside it, and Sheila bringing up the rear with Betty hanging on her arm. Miss Gillian and the vicar accompanied them to the end of Church Row.

'Well, Aunt Gill, have you had a happy birthday?' asked Luke. Then Miss Gillian turned her bright face to him.

'There's no one enjoys a birthday more than a seventy-years-old child,' she said quaintly. 'You see, my dear, when we come to that age we have had the best and the worst of our life, and we don't seem to fear the shadows as we used. When we are young we cannot see the wood for the trees, and there are awkward snags to trip us up; but some of us are wise enough as we grow older to look over the tree-tops.'

'I see what you mean, dear'; but Luke said under his breath, 'So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.'

'I have been thinking so much of your mother to-day, Luke,' went on Miss Gillian in the same cheery tone. 'That is one of the blessings of getting old—that we think more of the meetings than the partings. We seem to have got quite safely over the Sea of Sorrow, and we are just anchoring our little boat in some quiet harbour. It may be a bit dull at times'—and here there was a touch of wistfulness in the sweet old voice—'and one is impatient and longs for the marching orders. But there, I am just the foolish Gill that my darling Doreen used to call me.' And here Miss Gillian brushed away a quiet tear or two.

‘ You are a brave, heroic little soul, Aunt Gill.’ Luke spoke from his heart, and at this rare praise Miss Gillian blushed like a girl.

‘ Oh, the boy’s blarney,’ she said, trying to laugh ; ‘ did any one hear the likes of that ? ’ And then she stroked his coat-sleeve in rather a wheedling, coaxing fashion. ‘ Did you not think Sheila Lassiter looked sweet this evening, Luke ? ’

‘ She looked very nice.’ And then rather hastily, ‘ And so did Miss Woodford. I hope you are not fickle, Aunt Gill ; it is well to be off with the old love before you are on with the new.’ But Miss Gillian was not to be put off so easily.

‘ Martha is a dear girl,’ she said, ‘ but to my thinking Sheila Lassiter is just about as sweet as she can be. If I were a man I should fall in love with her.’

‘ Not you, Aunt Gill ’—for he loved to tease her.

‘ Yes, verily and indeed, dear boy ’—and Miss Gillian spoke with unusual earnestness. ‘ And if I ever had a niece ’—here there was a meaning grip on his arm—‘ I should like her to be like Miss Lassiter.’

‘ I thought you were such a stickler for beauty and that sort of thing,’ returned Luke. Of course he knew what she meant ; she was telling him in this round-about way that she wanted him to fall in love with Sheila Lassiter. She had often made this sort of suggestion before, but she had never been quite so keen about it.

‘ But she is quite lovely, Luke,’ she returned eagerly. ‘ I was only thinking this evening how plain poor dear Martha looked beside her. Her eyes are beautiful and so is her hair, and she has such a nice, frank expression. My dearest boy, if I only knew you had such a wife to take care of you when I am gone, I should be the

happiest old woman in the world.' But Luke only shook his head at this, and his face looked rather white and stern in the moonlight. 'Do think about it, Luke,' she whispered.

'It needs no thinking,' he returned quickly. 'No doubt you are right; Miss Lassiter is a sweet woman, and he will be a happy man who wins her; but'—very firmly—'I shall not be that man, Aunt Gill.'

'Oh, my dear, why not?'

'For an excellent reason, I assure you; because I never intend to have a wife. No, don't say any more, Aunt Gill, the thing is impossible.' And Luke said this with such an air of finality that Miss Gillian dared not utter another word.

CHAPTER XXII

‘BEGONE, DULL MELANCHOLY!’

Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds.—EMERSON.

Outdoor exercise is the best physic.—NAPOLEON.

Usually that which a man calls fate is a web of his own weaving from threads of his own spinning.—MARDEN.

SHEILA'S holiday week drew gaily to its close. The picnic tea at Chorley Grange had been a success, and only the vicar's absence had marred the enjoyment of the cycling trip to Bovey Mill. Sheila was surprised to find how much she missed him. But the afternoon in the Chorley woods had been simply delightful, and even Ned owned that he had never enjoyed himself more.

‘We were all in such good form,’ he remarked; ‘and I never saw his reverence in better spirits, She. He was the life of the party.’

Sheila smiled assent; but as she sat at her window in the moonlight, inhaling the fragrance of the night-blowing flowers and living again through the day's pleasure, she told herself that that quiet evening walk beside Chorley Lake with Luke Brett was the best part of the day to her.

They had all been very merry over the picnic tea,

and the vicar had told some excellent stories ; but as they strolled on in the soft, mellow evening light, with the sunset casting ruddy gleams on the water, Mr. Brett had relapsed into his usual gravity. Some word on Sheila's part led him to speak of his old home life, and by and by he began talking about his mother.

'I do not think that anything could recompense a man in later life for an unhappy childhood,' he had said. 'Happiness is the prerogative of childhood. To rob infancy of its rightful heritage is the basest tyranny and cruelty ; it out-herods Herod.'

'Ah, you are right there,' Sheila had rejoined. 'An unhappy child is a monstrous anomaly,' she continued.

'Ah, I know what you are going to say, Miss Lassiter, that even children are not exempt from suffering. I do not think I am more sensitive or thin-skinned than my fellows, but to me there can be no sadder idea than a hospital for incurable children—poor, innocent little martyrs, victims of disease and sin.'

'Yes, it is very sad.'

'But all the same we must be thankful that there are such pleasant shelters for our crippled little ones—they are excellent institutions. But we will not think of anything depressing this lovely evening. No one could have had a happier boyhood than mine.' And then, as though some overpowering impulse moved him, Luke began to speak of his mother, first hesitatingly, and then as though it were a joy to him to talk of her.

Sheila was much touched. She understood clearly that this reserved, self-contained man was paying her a rare compliment ; but she had no idea that she was the only woman, with the exception of his aunt, to whom he had ever spoken of his mother.

‘I suppose most boys care for their mothers,’ he went on, ‘but I think I worshipped mine; she was part of my religion. I believe—indeed I know—that she was very beautiful, and when I was a little lad I used to think the Blessed Virgin must have been like her. She was just the sweetest thing on earth to me, and she always seemed so young—no one ever had so young a mother.’

‘And you lost her?’ Sheila’s tone was soft and sympathetic.

‘No. One never loses one’s mother,’ he returned quietly. ‘I do not know that I am fanciful or superstitious, but I have an odd belief in my mother’s nearness. One cannot argue on such matters, but love teaches us many things. I should not care to part with my special creed, I am not so enamoured of loneliness.’

‘Oh no, and I like to hear you say it,’ returned Sheila. ‘There is too little faith in the world. People are far too ready to bury their dead and to forget.’

‘I could not forget if I tried,’ he returned simply. ‘That would be a poor return to make for all my mother’s goodness to me. Miss Lassiter, I think if you had known each other you would have been great friends. She had such a frank, childlike nature, and when she cared for people she never could do enough for them.’

A quick flush rose to Sheila’s cheek, but some unwonted shyness kept her silent. It was sweet to her to hear him say this, she felt no other speech had ever pleased her so well. Of course, if she had known her, she would have loved her, that beautiful Doreen, who was Miss Gillian’s darling.

‘Oh, she must have been lovely,’ she half-whispered when the silence became embarrassing; and then Ned

and Martha had joined them, and there was no more confidence.

'I wonder why he spoke to me about her,' she thought, as the breeze fanned her hot face. 'He said we should have been friends; he must think well of me to say that. I wish I had not been so foolish and tongue-tied, I was not half nice enough. If only Ned and Martha had not joined us just then——' But she little guessed, as she indulged in these blissful reveries, that Luke Brett was sternly taking himself to task.

'I wonder what possessed me to speak of my mother,' he thought, as he paced the churchyard path that night. 'I suppose it was the sunset; my darling always loved the sunset so. And then Miss Lassiter is so sympathetic; I never knew any one so restful.' He sighed, and Peter, paddling beside him, looked anxiously up, as though trying to peer through the darkness, and then whined in faithful response to his master's mood.

Luke stooped down and picked him up.

'Tired, old fellow, and ready for bed? But we have enjoyed our day for all that. But we must be careful, Peter, and not break bounds. It seems rather harmless, old boy, does it not? to talk about one's mother in the sunset; but I doubt if it were wise.' And as the little animal nestled against him, he carried him in.

'Well, Ned, our holiday week is over,' observed Sheila on the morning they expected their guests. She spoke with strenuous cheerfulness, but her eyes looked anxious, for she saw at once that Ned was not in his usual spirits. 'I suppose you will go down to the station to meet them?'

'Oh yes, I suppose so.'

'There is no need for us both to go, and I would

rather receive them here,' continued Sheila, and Ned grunted something in response. And then, as breakfast was finished, he betook himself to the garden, and tried to soothe his perturbed feelings by a matutinal pipe. Sheila looked after him wistfully.

'Poor Ned,' she said to herself, 'we neither of us feel specially happy this morning, but how merry we were last night.' For they had spent the evening at the Old Cottage, and Ned had been in quite hilarious spirits, and Sheila had called him to order more than once. 'Really, Ned, you are behaving like a school-boy,' she had said—but Betty had taken his part. 'You must not scold the Herr Professor, he is quite the nicest man in the world, for he has cleaned my bicycle as well as Martha's.' But Sheila, whose thoughts were wandering, did not notice Ned's queer look as Betty said this. For once in her life she was a little dense. She never even noticed how unusually silent Martha was that evening.

It was natural under the circumstances that she should attribute Ned's unusual glumness to his repugnance at the idea of the expected guests, and Sheila was full of pity for him.

'He will feel better about it when they are once safely housed,' she said to herself. 'He will soon find out that it won't make so much difference to him as he thinks. He will be safe from all intrusion in his study; and when the children are in bed we shall get nice quiet times together. I mean to do my best to smooth over difficulties, and I know Ivor will help me. He is so grateful to us both, poor boy! and—— But it is no use looking forward—we must take each day as it comes.' And Sheila resolutely braced herself for the morning's work.

When her housekeeping duties were over, she put the finishing touches to the rooms prepared for the coming guests. As she did so, she thought how pleased Nell would be with them. They looked so fresh and dainty with their snowy quilts and muslin curtains ; and even the little back sitting-room that was to be allotted to Nell and the children looked cosy and comfortable.

Sheila felt quite satisfied with the result of her labours. 'It looks all very nice,' she said to herself, as she took down her garden basket and went out to gather some roses for Nell's toilet table. She was surprised to find Ned still in the garden. He joined her at once.

'I suppose those flowers are for Nell?' he said, after watching her silently for a moment. And Sheila nodded as she cut another crimson rambler and placed it carefully in her basket.

'What a lot of trouble you take about things,' he continued, and his tone was somewhat apologetic. 'She, I am in a confoundedly bad humour this morning, but you must not think that I am bothering about their coming.'

Sheila was so surprised at this speech that she snipped off a promising bud by mistake.

'What is bothering you, dear?' she asked ; but Ned evaded the question.

'Oh, I am bilious or a bit hipped. I feel as though a ten miles' walk would do me good!'

'In this heat—oh, Ned, what nonsense!' And then a little plaintively, 'I thought we were chums, and that you always told me things ; you never used to put me off like this.' Ned gave an uneasy laugh.

'There is nothing to tell,' he returned hastily ; but Sheila knew that he was fibbing.

‘I don’t pretend that I am looking forward to this afternoon, but I daresay we shall shake down all right. A man must be in the blues sometimes ; very likely I have been smoking too much this hot weather.’

‘Very likely I am a goose, and you are another,’ returned Sheila, with an air of fine disdain. ‘What is your favourite expression, Ned?—“Tell that to the marines.” And Sheila threw a rose at him, which he caught and put in his buttonhole. But when he looked up he saw she was gazing at him anxiously.

‘Ned, you are not a bit yourself this morning,’ she said in a distressed tone ; ‘and last night you were as fit as possible.’

‘Last night I was a fool, and this morning I have come to my senses’—and Ned’s tone was almost savage. ‘No, She, I can’t talk about it. One has to pay for being an ass. Put all this nonsense out of your head, and I’ll take a walk and pull myself together and come back in a better temper’ ; and Ned knocked out the ashes from his pipe with much energy, and whistled to Kaiser, who was pretending to take a nap, but who was really watching ‘the Orphan’s’ stealthy advances across the tennis-lawn.

Sheila felt much perplexed as she returned to the house. Ned had his moods like other people—he could be irritable at times and say a sharp thing or two—but as a rule his temperament was equable and cheerful ; but this morning he seemed unusually depressed. It was all very well trying to throw dust in her eyes, and saying he was bilious or cross—Sheila was too clear-sighted to believe that. Something was troubling him, and she would never rest until she discovered what was amiss, though she must wait for time and opportunity.

Ned’s restlessness was infectious, and when Sheila

had arranged her flowers, she thought she would run over to the Old Cottage for a chat with the girls ; it would do her good and help to pass the time.

She found Martha alone, making a new blouse for Betty. As she rose to greet her friend, Sheila noticed that she looked pale and tired, and there were dark shadows under her eyes.

'Dear Martha, you are not well !' she exclaimed.

'Indeed I am, Sheila,' she returned hastily. 'It was such a hot night that I could not sleep, and that made my head ache a little. Betty wanted me to rest, but I was so anxious to finish this blouse. You know Betty is going to Cottingdean next week to stay with the Allens and be introduced to Katie's *fiancée*.' For Betty's special chum Katie had just announced her engagement to a young doctor who had bought a practice in Cottingdean. Betty had been in the wildest state of excitement ever since she had heard the news. 'Charlie liked him, he will be so pleased,' were her first words.

'Betty seems very delighted about the whole business,' returned Sheila. 'I felt rather sorry for her at first—I thought it would be hard for her to see Katie's happiness.' For Sheila knew all about Betty's love-affair, and how she and Charlie Allen fully understood each other, though neither Mr. Woodford nor Mr. Allen would hear of an engagement between the young people until Charlie was in a position to think of marrying. The Gold Coast was not a place for an English girl. Charlie must find a good berth in a healthier place before he could take out a wife. 'Of course they understood each other,' Martha had said ; 'Charlie knows she will wait for him, so he is not afraid.'

Betty had endorsed this on one occasion.

'I have belonged to Charlie ever since we were

children,' she had said with unusual seriousness ; ' he always took care of me, and would not let the big boys tease me ; and he used to give me presents, and call me his little sweetheart. Oh, there is no one like Charlie in the whole world ! ' And Betty looked so winsome and pretty as she said this, that Sheila hardly wondered at her lover's faithfulness. They were a charming pair, she thought, both so young and full of hope and energy.

' Betty is too unselfish to begrudge Katie her happiness,' remarked Martha, when Sheila hinted at Betty's possible regret. ' Of course she misses Charlie dreadfully ; but they write to each other, you know, and he is a capital correspondent. He likes Betty to be with his people as much as possible, and as it is good for her to have a change, I always encourage her to go. Isn't this blouse pretty, Sheila ? I think the colour is lovely. I got the silk at Whiteley's,—it was such a bargain.'

' I wish I could work as you do, Martha,' observed Sheila, as she looked at the exquisite stitches ; ' needle-work in your hands is quite a fine art. It seems to me that you do everything so beautifully.'

' Oh, you are flattering me'—but Martha looked pleased ; work was a passion with her, and she was certainly mistress of her craft.

' I was always so glad that I was a woman and not a man,' she went on ; ' it would trouble me dreadfully to sit with my hands before me.'

' When I say that sort of thing to Ned, he declares that he is full of pity for us because we do not smoke, and have no idea of the bliss we miss.'

' Yes, I know ; he is very eloquent on that subject '—but Martha spoke a little hurriedly. ' I fancy I saw

him and Kaiser go up Sandy Lane a little while ago. It is surely too hot for walking.'

'So I observed, but he seemed to think it would do him good. He seems a little down this morning, and yet how merry we all were last night! Ned was in a ridiculous mood, but then Betty teased him so. Now I remember you were the only quiet one.'

'Oh, I am always quiet,'—and here Martha caught her thread and broke it; 'one can be quiet and happy too. I was very happy, Sheila.'

'Were you, dear? I think we all were. Somehow we all seemed in touch. Do you know what I mean?'

'Oh yes'; but Martha did not look up from her work.

'The atmosphere of the Old Cottage is so restful and pleasant,' continued Sheila, talking for the mere pleasure of expressing her feelings. 'I was saying so to Ned the other night, when we had been having supper with you, and he quite agreed with me; he said he always felt good at the Cottage. You and Betty ought to be proud of such a compliment.'

'You must tell Betty that,' but Martha flushed up as she spoke. Then she looked at the clock and began folding up her work.

'It is luncheon time and I must fly,' exclaimed Sheila. 'Ned has to go down to the station to meet our guests; we expect them up here about four.'

'Yes, I know,' with ready sympathy; 'you will be thankful when the bustle of the arrival is over.' And then she added, with strong but repressed feelings, 'You are both so good about this, and I know how hard it is for you'; and she kissed Sheila with unusual tenderness.

They were both in the porch by this time, and

were still standing hand-in-hand; when Miss Mowcher began to bark, and Ned's tall figure came round the corner.

'I must go in and see after father,' observed Martha hurriedly; 'your brother is waiting for you, Sheila.' And before Ned had time to raise his hat, she was gone. Ned looked at his sister rather suspiciously as she joined him.

'I thought I saw Miss Woodford in the porch, She?' he said at once.

'Yes, dear, we had been having a nice little talk; but she said her father wanted her, so she hurried away.'

'Oh, I see,' but it was evident from Ned's manner that he was not satisfied.

'Did she say anything about last night,' he asked rather hesitatingly, as they walked up the garden path.

'Last night—I hardly remember. Oh yes, I remarked that she had been the only quiet one, and she observed that one could be quiet and happy too, and that she had been very happy. Indeed, I think we all were, Ned.'

'Of course we were—we had a good time all round.' Ned's face beamed as he spoke. Evidently his walk had done him good, and the foul fiend melancholy had been exorcised. Sheila marvelled at the change in him, but she wisely held her peace. "There is a time for speech and a time for silence," says the wise king. If only people would lay this to heart!

CHAPTER XXIII

‘HOW AM I TO LIVE UP TO IT?’

Each spirit weaves the robe it wears
From out life's busy loom ;
And common tasks and daily cares
Make up the threads of doom.

ANON.

We often do more good by our sympathy than by our labours.—
CANON FARRAR.

IT was with somewhat complex feelings that Sheila sat at work in the fir parlour that afternoon awaiting the arrival of her guests, and the sound of carriage wheels on the road leading from the village made her heart beat more quickly. Ned, who was on the seat beside the driver, signalled to her almost gaily.

‘I have brought them all right,’ he called out. And then, as Ivor leant out of the window with a smile of greeting, Sheila's eyes grew a little misty, and she forgot everything but the joy of feeling his arms round her again.

‘How are you, She? My word, isn't it jolly to see your dear old face again! You look uncommonly fit. I think she has grown handsomer, Ned.’ But his brother was too busy handing out Nell and the children to make any reply.

Nell, who looked a little shy and awkward, as

though she were not sure of her welcome, brightened up as Sheila kissed her and spoke a kind word of greeting.

Sheila said afterwards to Ned that she would hardly have known her. The neat blue serge and sailor hat had quite transformed the draggled slovenly-looking young woman they had seen that first never-to-be-forgotten day. Nell had evidently taken great pains with herself; her hair was carefully arranged, and her complexion looked clearer and less pallid. The children too looked well-groomed and tidy, and Tom at once called attention to his sailor suit and new boots.

‘Tommy has fine new clothes, and so has Bunnie and dada,’ he announced solemnly. ‘Look, Man, this is Tommy’s own pocket’; and he proudly produced his handkerchief and a couple of pennies.

‘That’s your Uncle Ned, Tom,’ exclaimed Ivor, lifting him on to his knee; ‘you must not call him “Man.”’ But Tommy was not inclined to give up the name.

‘He is Tommy’s Man,’ he said obstinately; ‘don’t want any Uncle Neds’; and with childish caprice he held out his arms to Ned. ‘Take Tom for a nice ride, Man’; and Ned at once hoisted him on to his shoulder. Before the day was over, he and his nephew were the best of friends, and, rather to Sheila’s dismay, Tommy seemed disposed to follow Ned about everywhere.

‘Don’t encourage him too much, dear, or you will find him troublesome.’ But Ned turned a deaf ear to this prudent advice—Tom’s preference for his society was distinctly flattering.

‘He isn’t a bad little chap, only they have spoilt him,’ he said indulgently. ‘Do you know, he reminds

me of Peter ; they are both a bit bandy, and they have got nice pathetic faces.'

'All the same, you had better not let him follow you into your room,' observed Sheila sensibly ; 'if you give him an inch, he will want an ell.' But, though Ned evidently agreed with her, he was weak enough to treat with the enemy.

One unlucky morning, later on, Tommy evaded his mother's surveillance and climbed up the forbidden stairs ; a minute later a hot little face peeped into the study. 'Tommy's come to sit with you, Man !' he said joyously. And though Ned was very busy at that moment, he could not find it in his heart to damp him.

'You will have to be very quiet, old fellow, or out you go,' he returned in Fee-fo-fum tone. 'I will give you a pencil and some paper to draw pictures, but you must not speak—not a single word, Tom, or I shall carry you to your mother.'

'Won't speak, Man.' And actually Tommy kept his word, for when Sheila looked in half-an-hour later, Tommy was seated on the floor with a large dictionary before him, which served as his table, and Kaiser was stretched beside him. Ned never even saw her, he was so absorbed in his work.

'It was such a pretty picture,' she told Nell ; 'and the child seemed as good as gold.'

An hour later Ned felt a sudden weight upon his foot, and found Tommy had fallen fast asleep, with one arm clasping his uncle's leg ; he only murmured drowsily as Ned lifted him up. 'Isn't it queer how fond the little chap is of me?' he remarked to Sheila when he narrated the incident ; but she saw at once that he was pleased.

Tea was all ready for the travellers, and as soon

as the meal was over Sheila took Nell up to her new quarters. Ivor, who was anxious to see his wife's pleasure, followed them. Nell's 'Oh' spoke volumes; she seemed almost afraid to cross the threshold.

'Is it really our room, Ivor?' she asked in a tone of awe; 'I never slept in such a big place in my life.'

'The other room across the passage, where the kids are to sleep, is just as big,' he returned. 'Come to the window, Nell; the view is just ripping.' But poor Nell looked at her Goshen through a mist of tears.

'Oh, it is all so fresh and beautiful,' she sobbed; 'and I don't know how I can live up to it.' The unspoken oppression that had weighed so heavily on Nell ever since she crossed the threshold of The Moorings had found vent at last in words. 'It is the kindness and the thought that upsets me.'

Sheila put her arm round Nell's thin shoulders in a protecting, sisterly way.

'Supposing you go down and talk to Ned, Ivor,' she said quietly; 'you might take the children on the tennis-lawn for a little, and leave Nell to me; I mean to help her unpack and settle comfortably.'

But when Ivor had left them, Sheila put Nell in the big easy-chair and sat down beside her. 'You are just tired out, dear,' she said gently; 'you have been packing and getting the children ready, and you are just overdone with the heat and excitement. I know exactly how you feel, Nell, but in a day or two you will be rested, and the strangeness will have worn off.'

'Oh, it is not only that,' returned Nell, gulping down another sob; 'I am used to feeling tired and worn out, and my back always aches. I think I am a bit low, because I am afraid you and your friends will be ashamed of me, and then Ivor will be troubled. I was

only a poor working girl when he married me, and though he was not in love with me—not as I was with him, you know—he has grown to care for me, and no husband could be kinder.'

'I am rejoiced to hear it, Nell.'

'I have been a drag upon him all these years,' went on Nell mournfully, 'but I never remember him being cross with me or the children; his illness made him a bit fractious, poor fellow, but one could not be surprised at that. It used to break my heart to see him so patient, and to know how homesick and sad he felt. I used to hear him talk in his sleep sometimes about Ned and She.'

'You have both had a hard time, Nell, but you must try to forget it and be happy. There must be no sad faces at The Moorings. We want you and Ivor to rest and get strong, and then by and by he will be able to work for you and the children; but you must both have a long holiday first.'

Sheila's voice was very persuasive and soothing; she guessed intuitively how full Nell's heart was, and how difficult she found it to express her gratitude in words. Nell's pretty eyes were swollen with crying, but their expression was very sweet and touching as she looked up at Sheila.

'I know I must seem common to you,' she whispered, 'father being what he was and mother only a factory girl; but they did their best to give me some education and to teach me what was right, and if I had only tried to improve myself a little, I might have done better; but after I was married I had no chance. I think I am a bit proud, Sheila'—and Nell drooped her head in a shamefaced fashion—'for I hate the thought that you and your brother should look down on me;'

but I will try my best, and if you will only tell me things, you will see your hints are not thrown away'; and there was no mistaking Nell's earnestness.

'My dear girl'—and it was evident that this appeal surprised and touched Sheila—'of course I will help you. But you must not say such things, for it pains me to hear them. Ned and I only wish to remember that you are Ivor's wife and the mother of his children, and that you have done your duty and worked your hardest all these years. You have nothing to fear from us, Nell; no one we call friend will look down on you'; and Sheila's caressing hand touched Nell's hair softly as though she were soothing a worn-out child. The next minute Nell's arms were round her neck.

'Oh, I do love you so,' she said huskily. 'I never met any one like you before; you have just comforted me and taken out the sting. Now I won't be troubling you any longer; I'll just unpack and put Tommy to bed; and Bunnie will be tired too, poor little maid, for she has been on her feet since six.'

'I don't think Bunnie looks very tired,' returned Sheila in an amused tone, as she drew Nell to the window.

Ned had Tommy hoisted on his shoulder, and was prancing across the tennis-lawn with Bunnie scampering after him.

'Stop, stop, Mr. Horse, you go too fast,' they heard her say.

But Tommy dug his little heels into Ned's chest, 'Go on, Man, never mind Bunnie'; and Tommy shouted with glee.

'Bless their little hearts, they do seem happy,' murmured Nell. 'They never saw a garden before in their lives.' And then she and Sheila set to work filling

the deep old-fashioned drawers with the new garments that Sheila had purchased.

'I am glad I took your advice about the gray dress,' observed Nell shyly. 'Ivor was ever so pleased when I put it on for him to see; he said the colour just suited me, and that I had never looked better, and he hated red and green.' But Nell kept the latter part of his speech to herself.

'You just follow Sheila's advice and you will do the right thing, Nell,' he had said. 'If you took pains with yourself and did your hair more tidily, you would look far better. You were always a bit too smart for my taste, and I hate a ragged fringe'; and though Nell was rather wounded by this marital frankness, she was too sweet-tempered to resent it.

Tommy was rather over-excited and fretful, and would not allow Sheila to touch him; so she contented herself with Bunnie. As she was sponging the child's face with warm water, Bunnie looked up at her aunt with an odd, wistful little smile.

'I ain't such a very little girl, Aunt Sheila.'

'Are you not, dear?'

'Mother never washes my face for me now,' continued Bunnie confidentially; 'she says I am a big girl, and that she is much too tired. But I think it is nicer to be little. Mother always dresses and undresses Tommy. When I am very sleepy the buttons get all mixed, you know, and sometimes the strings get into a knot, and then mother says I am a careless little girl.'

'You are quite sleepy now, are you not, Bunnie, and you like Aunt Sheila to put you to bed?'

Bunnie nodded her curly head.

'I like it dreadfully,' she whispered. 'Your hands are so soft and lovely, and the tangles don't hurt when

you comb them. Oh, I am so comfortable,' murmured the child drowsily, as she rested her heavy head on the pillow.

'It must be supper-time. I think Tommy is asleep,' observed Sheila. And Nell rose with a sigh of relief.

They found Ned and Ivor sitting out in front, enjoying the evening coolness. But there was a white, weary look on Ivor's face when they adjourned to the lamp-lighted supper-room. Sheila looked at him anxiously.

'You have let him talk too much, Ned,' she said a little reproachfully; which was somewhat hard on Ned, who had done his best to entertain his brother.

Ivor laughed and protested that he was all right. But he was evidently too exhausted to eat, and he was glad when Sheila suggested that he should go to bed. And Nell was equally glad to be dismissed.

'It is a lovely night, She, let us have a turn on the links,' observed Ned, with a touch of eagerness in his manner; and Sheila took down her garden hat at once.

'Ivor looks terribly delicate,' she observed. 'I should like Dr. Moorhouse to see him and Tommy.' And Ned muttered assent.

He listened a little unwillingly at first as Sheila repeated the purport of her conversation with Nell, but after a time he grew more interested.

'She is not a bad sort, and she looks quite decent to-night,' he remarked; 'I don't think we need mind introducing her to the Woodfords.'

'Why, of course not, Ned. Martha and Betty will be as nice as possible to her. I thought of asking them to come to tea to-morrow. It is Betty's last day, and we may as well get it over.'

'That is not a bad idea of yours, Sheila. I suppose Mr. Woodford will come too?'

'Oh yes, I hope so. They cannot both leave him, and I do not want Martha to remain behind.'

'All right, I'll go in about four and wheel him over,' observed Ned in a contented tone. And then they sat down on the bench by the roadside, and looked across the dark shadowy moor, faintly lit by the pale moonlight.

The sweet breath of a thousand wild-flowers, hidden away in hedgerows and hollows, pervaded the evening breeze, and the deep stillness was only broken by the hoot of an owl and the rusty notes of the nightjar. The sound of soft cropping of the herbage near them was followed by the sudden flinging up of hoofs, as two or three ponies left off browsing and scampered over the moor, their neigh of dismay answered by a distant companion.

There was a fresh salty fragrance in the air that lifted Sheila's soft hair from her temples which was wonderfully reviving and invigorating. She had felt tired and jaded from the excitement of the day, but as she sat there in the summer darkness, enveloped by the mystery and silence of the coming night, a sense of peace and well-being seemed to enfold her, and in Longfellow's quaint words—

The cares that infest the day
Seemed to fold their tents like the Arabs,
And as silently steal away.

Involuntarily she stretched out her hand to her companion. But Ned was in a brown study, and did not notice her light touch.

'I am not so tired now, Ned; the air has done

me good, and I feel that I shall sleep.' Then he roused himself with some degree of effort.

'It has been rather a trying day for both of us. What a puzzle life is, She; one can't fit in the pieces somehow.'

'How do you mean, dear?' But he was evidently unwilling to be questioned.

'Oh, one has to work out one's difficulty; there is no Ready Reckoner in the arithmetic of life—every one must do their sum for themselves.' And then he continued thoughtfully, 'We seem to have come to a fresh milestone to-day, and I have an odd sort of fancy that I should like to peep round the next corner.'

'I think I know what you mean, Ned.'

'We have done our bit of level ground,' he went on, 'and now there is a hill or two to climb, and the road is a bit rough, I am afraid. Well, we shall see. But it is getting late, my dear, and I must not keep you up.'

'But I would rather sit here and talk to you, Ned.' But Ned was deaf to this appeal. He took Sheila gently by the arm and piloted her across the dark brae. As they passed the Old Cottage he paused for a moment.

'I hope the old man is not unwell,' he said uneasily. 'There is a light in his room, and I am sure I see a shadow moving across the blind.'

'It is probably Martha,' returned Sheila quietly; 'she often goes in to see if her father is asleep. There, I am right, you see—she has taken the candle away.'

'It is far too late for her to be up,' he returned in a low voice; 'she gives herself no rest.' And Sheila

thought this solicitude for her friend's welfare was very nice on Ned's part.

'She is such a good daughter,' she said quickly ; 'what a wife she would make, if only——' but here Sheila checked herself.

'If only what?' asked Ned rather sharply. 'Why don't you finish your sentence, She?'

'I was only going to say, if she were not so plain ; but I am afraid no nice man will fall in love with her.'

'Pshaw!' was all Ned's answer to this ; but his manner was so impatient that Sheila fancied that her remark had not pleased him. A moment later he wished her good-night and went up to his study, followed closely by his faithful satellite Kaiser.

CHAPTER XXIV

AN EVENING HOUR

The earth is every day overspread with the veil of night, for the same reason that the cages of birds are darkened, namely, that we may the more readily apprehend the higher harmonies of thought, in the hush and quiet of darkness.—RICHTER.

A FEW days after the arrival of 'Tommy and Co.,' as Ned phrased it, Sheila went down to the village to have a prescription made up at the chemist's. On her way she was overtaken by Mr. Brett. He had evidently hurried a little, for he was somewhat breathless.

'If you do not mind waiting for a moment,' he panted, 'I should like to walk with you, as we are both bound for the same destination'; and as Sheila smiled assent to this, he leant against the fence and looked over the long meadow towards the church tower.

Sheila stood beside him silently. Mr. Brett had been away for some days, and had only returned late the previous evening; and the week of his absence had seemed unusually long to Sheila. She was much pleased at this unexpected meeting, but all the same her first word was a reproof.

‘Mr. Brett, how can you be so unwise? You know you ought not to walk so fast in this heat.’

‘It was your fault,’ he returned with a wilful look. ‘If you had only walked more slowly, I should have had no difficulty in overtaking you. But I shall be all right in a minute. When will you follow Shakespeare’s advice?—

To climb steep hills
Requires slow pace at first.’

‘I don’t call this a hill,’ returned Sheila, rather surprised at this counter-attack; ‘and I did not know that I was walking fast. Please don’t talk till you are quite rested’; for his breathlessness rather alarmed her. But he brushed aside this remark.

‘Peter deserves a scolding too,’ he observed, looking down at the little dachshund. ‘I explained to him that it was very hot, and that he had better stay in my study; but evidently solitude was not to his taste. The result is that I shall have to carry him all the way home.’

‘Peter will never learn to be obedient if you spoil him so,’ returned Sheila. ‘But he is a faithful little creature,’ she continued smilingly; ‘I believe, if he had his choice, he would rather follow his master through the burning fiery furnace than be left alone.’ Something in Sheila’s words, lightly as they were spoken, seemed to strike Luke rather forcibly.

‘They teach us lessons, these dumb companions of ours,’ he observed thoughtfully. ‘Peter’s devotion to his master rather shames me sometimes; it is so utterly selfless. I wonder which of us, Miss Lassiter, would choose the burning fiery furnace’; and Luke’s dark face had a strangely vivid look on it.

Sheila made no response in words, but she evidently

understood him. He often said these kind of things to her, as though he were thinking aloud ; and she always treasured up these sayings and brooded over them in quiet moments.

‘He has such a beautiful mind,’ she would say to herself. ‘He is not content with preaching to his people ; he tries to live up to his own teaching. That is why his sermons come home to one with such force. He speaks of what he knows and feels. There is no arrow drawn at a venture.’

The next minute Luke signified his readiness to proceed.

‘I want to hear all your news,’ he said brightly. ‘I seem to have been away for weeks instead of only eight days. By this time I suppose your visitors are feeling quite at home, and that you have all shaken down comfortably together.’

‘Oh yes, I think so.’ But Sheila’s tone was a little dubious, for she was not wholly satisfied with Ned ; he was still somewhat moody and silent. ‘It has seemed a long week to me too,’ she continued.

Sheila said this quite naturally ; she had no fear that her words would be misconstrued. Luke Brett was the last man in the world to attribute any esoteric meaning to her naïve confession—no one was more devoid of vanity than he. That Sheila Lassiter missed him, that, unconsciously to herself, he was becoming necessary to her, and that every day she depended on him more for guidance—these facts were at present hidden from his eyes ; and though he would have been the first to own that a very real and deep friendship was growing up between them, he was blind to his own peril and hers. He was like a strong man armed, tripped up by an unwary pitfall in the dark ;

all his armour could not save him, for no coat of mail had ever been fashioned that could repel the dart of that wily and invincible adversary whom men love and dread.

Luke Brett took Sheila's speech quite simply ; he never even thought of himself. No doubt the week had been a long and trying one. One or two questions skilfully put soon elicited the information he desired. Sheila had much to tell him. Dr. Moorhouse had paid his visit, and on the whole his verdict had been satisfactory.

'He says Ivor's lungs are quite sound,' she went on, 'but his debility is great ; his strength has been undermined by privation and anxiety—indeed Dr. Moorhouse told Ned privately that it was a miracle he had pulled through that illness. With rest and care he does not doubt that Ivor will regain his normal condition, but in his opinion he will not be fit to work for six months or even longer. Poor Ned looked a little grave when Dr. Moorhouse said this. We were both rather disappointed, for we hoped that Ivor would be able to take some light berth before the winter.'

'It would be safer to act on Dr. Moorhouse's advice,' observed Mr. Brett, 'he is a sound man, and no alarmist ; in your brother's weak condition, influenza, or even a chill, might be a serious thing. But I can understand that this is a grave question for you and your brother ; you would hardly wish your visitors to remain at The Moorings during the winter.'

'I am afraid our wishes have little to do with it,' returned Sheila, with a sigh. 'But there is time enough to decide about that later on. We shall certainly keep them for two or three months. Dr. Moorhouse says no air could be better for Tommy ; he thinks it quite possible that he will outgrow his delicacy. He is to

spend his days in the garden or on the moor, but he is not to walk much until his legs are stronger. Ned says he means to rig up a little tent on the tennis-lawn, and then they can be out in all weathers.'

'Not a bad idea, I should say.'

'We are going to get a second-hand perambulator,' continued Sheila, 'and Ivor will take him out on the links every morning; it will be something for him to do, and he can read his paper while the children play. And Nell will go too sometimes. I am very anxious that the house should be as quiet as possible in the mornings, and then Ned will get on with his work. Unfortunately Tommy has taken a fancy for his uncle's society, and is always clamouring to go to him.'

Mr. Brett smiled. 'I daresay Lassiter appreciates the compliment,' he remarked. And then, as they had reached the chemist's, Sheila went in with her prescription, while Luke crossed the road to the library. Here she found him later on, rummaging among the books for a special volume he wanted, and as soon as this was found they went to the post-office, and then set their faces towards home.

'I mean to make a formal call to-morrow,' observed Luke, as he unfurled his sun umbrella, for the noonday sun was blazing. 'If you will permit me, I will defer my visit until the evening; it will be cooler then.'

'You will find us in the garden,' returned Sheila, in a hesitating voice. She was debating with herself whether she could ask him to supper; but a vivid remembrance of Nell's shy gaucherie deterred her. Nell was improving daily, but she was still very timid with strangers. She had scarcely opened her mouth all the time the Woodfords had been there, and when Miss Gillian had paid her visit she had been equally

silent. Ivor had taken her to task when Miss Gillian had gone.

‘You might have said something civil to the old lady, Nell,’ he remarked; ‘you heard her say her call was on you and not on Sheila. I thought her rather a jolly old bird myself, but there you sat, like a prim little charity-girl, with your “No, Miss Gillian” or “Certainly, Miss Gillian,” till I longed to shake you.’

‘Shan’t shake my dear little mummy’—and Tommy scrambled into Nell’s lap and glared at his father.

Ivor burst out laughing. ‘Little pitchers have long ears,’ he observed. ‘I did not know the jackanapes was in the room. You are throttling your mother, sonny. No one is going to shake her—it was only a figure of speech, young man.’

‘Why didn’t you say “Yes, ma’am,” and “No, ma’am,” Nell, like a good little girl’; for Ivor was in a teasing mood, and it pleased him to rouse Nell to weak, impotent wrath. ‘Don’t you know it is bad form to repeat a person’s name with every sentence?’

‘There now, I have done the wrong thing as usual,’ returned Nell in a despairing tone. ‘And I wanted so much to be nice to that pretty little old lady—for she was just lovely. You might have helped me, Ivey, instead of sitting opposite and staring me out of countenance, when you know how it drives me silly. Tommy is right to take his poor mother’s part’; and Nell was visibly hurt by this unkind banter. But happily at that moment Sheila returned to throw oil on the stormy waters.

‘Miss Gillian says you have pretty eyes, Nell; and that she thinks you a nice, harmless little person, though a bit shy. Those are her very words, dear.’ Then Nell flashed an indignant look at Ivor.

‘And the things he has been saying, Sheila—calling me a little fool of a charity-girl! Well, that’s what you meant,’ as Ivor uttered a shocked protest—‘My dear child, truth before everything.’ But perhaps Ivor’s conscience accused him, for the next moment he extended the olive branch.

‘Give me a kiss, young woman. And, Tommy, you rascal, if you dare threaten your revered parent again, I will whack you!’ and Ivor made a face at his son, and walked off leaving Nell in the seventh heaven; for the loving and humble little soul was thankful for the least favour from her lord and master.

‘I do wish I could get over my silliness,’ she said to Sheila, ‘for it vexes Ivor so to see me so awkward. Miss Gillian was just sweet, and I was loving her all the time. I wonder what she thought of Ivor.’

But Nell would hardly have been content with Miss Gillian’s speech.

‘Ivor Lassiter is a good-looking man,’ she observed to her nephew, on the evening of his return, ‘but he is a poor feckless laddie for all that, and can’t hold a candle to his brother. And he looks to me as though he were in the first stage of decline; but it seems that Dr. Moorhouse holds a different opinion.’

‘What did you think of his wife, Aunt Gill?’

‘What could I think of a sickly, silent little body who never opened her mouth, and looked scared if any one made a remark to her? But there is something pathetic about her too, for she has had her troubles, poor little woman.’

It was the remembrance of this little scene that made Sheila hesitate to invite Luke. The supper-party, with Nell tongue-tied and ill at ease, would hardly be an enjoyable meal. It would be better for

him to come while they were sitting out in front. Nell would be up with the children for a time, and he could make acquaintance with Ivor; and so it was arranged.

When Luke Brett and Peter made their appearance at the appointed hour, they found Sheila and her brothers sitting out on the gravel path enjoying the evening air; and as Luke shook hands with Ivor, he endorsed Miss Gillian's opinion. Ivor Lassiter was certainly a good-looking fellow, and, in spite of his rough life, he had the unmistakable air of a gentleman. He might be a feckless laddie, as Aunt Gill had said, but he had a pleasant manner and could talk fluently and intelligently.

He and Luke were soon deep on the subject of Australian politics, when Nell's voice was heard from the porch in the dusk. The vicar's figure was invisible, and she had no idea that a stranger was present.

'I wish you would come here a moment, Ivey—Tommy is so heavy. He is such a naughty boy; he says it is too hot to go to sleep, so I wrapped him up in a shawl and brought him down, and he has promised not to cry any more.'

'Let me take him, Mrs. Lassiter,' observed Luke in his deep, pleasant tone. But Tommy only wailed afresh at the strange voice, and poor Nell looked ready to drop with confusion.

'I did not know you had a visitor, Sheila,' she said tremulously, 'or I never would have brought Tommy down; but I'll carry him back and stop with him a bit.' But Tommy, fretful with heat and sleepiness, struggled furiously.

'Tommy wants Man—will go to Man'; and then Ned came promptly to the rescue. The next moment

Tommy was comfortably settled on his uncle's knee, and Nell gently pushed into a chair; and before she had time to get shy, she was telling Luke Tommy's age and answering his questions about the children quite simply and naturally. Perhaps the darkness helped her, or there was something reassuring in the vicar's tone. But that night Nell did her level best, as Ivor said afterwards; and even Sheila breathed more freely.

Tommy behaved in quite a seraphic fashion when he had got his way. He stroked Ned's face drowsily. The touch of the hot little fingers gave Ned a curious feeling. What if he should ever hold a child of his own on his knee? Ned's face burnt in the darkness, and he took off his spectacles to wipe them. His hands trembled a little as he did so.

Tommy was soon fast asleep wrapped up in the old shawl, with his little cheek nestled against Ned's shoulder. But Ned would not allow Nell to touch him.

'He is all right,' he said hastily. 'He is as light as a feather, and he will sleep far better like this. The air is a bit thundery to-night, and though the attics are large, they are hot.'

'But I am afraid of troubling you, Mr. Edward.' Nell could not be induced to call Ned by his Christian name. She would not have taken such a liberty for worlds.

'He is a good fellow,' she said to Ivor, 'but I can't feel as at home with him as I do with Sheila. He is so big, and then he has a way of looking at you through his glasses that makes me feel shy. Yes, I know he is your brother,' as Ivor remarked rather drily on the fact, 'and I am not likely to forget it,

when he is so kind to us ; but I have not got used to him, you see, that is why I call him Mr. Edward.'

Ned, who was always gentle with the poor little partridge of a woman, as he sometimes called Nell, took pains to assure her that Tommy was no burden at all ; but after this he grew so silent that Sheila thought he was asleep too, until she saw that his eyes were wide open, and then she wondered a little.

It was hardly like Ned to drop out of the conversation and leave Ivor to entertain his guest. But Luke Brett hardly seemed to notice it. Ivor was telling him some Bush stories. Luke was so well amused that he forgot the lateness of the hour, and only the play of sheet-lightning on the distant horizon recalled him to the consciousness that he was paying an unusually long visit.

'Here I am keeping you all up. Why did you not send me away an hour ago, Miss Lassiter?' he said in mock distress.

'Ivor, old fellow, just catch hold of Jackanapes,' exclaimed Ned. 'I will walk back with you, Brett, if you will wait a moment. I have not stretched my legs to-day, and it is too hot to go in and sleep. I believe there is a storm coming.'

'No, I think not, it has broken in another direction,' returned Luke. And then Sheila walked with them to the gate.

She rather hoped that Ned would have asked her to come too. She would have liked the stroll back with him, and the electricity in the air made her restless. But for once Ned forgot his chum.

'Pack them all off to bed, She,' he said hurriedly, as he wished her good-night ; 'and just leave the door on the latch—very likely I shall take a longer walk.'

And he whistled to Kaiser, who obeyed, crazy with delight.

Sheila leant on the gate in the darkness until the sound of their footsteps and voices died away. That night she had only played the part of listener. She could not remember that Luke Brett had spoken more than a sentence or two to her—he had been absorbed in Ivor's conversation, with a kindly word addressed at intervals to Nell—and yet how full of enjoyment those two hours had been to Sheila. The very sound of the deep, vibrating voice seemed like music in her ears.

'He is so kind,' she said to herself, as she went in; 'I know he means to take an interest in Ivor for our sakes. He was drawing him out all the time. Even Nell was at her ease with him. There is something magnetic in his quiet influence. He has such a way with him, he puts people at their ease. I had no idea that Ivor could talk like that.' But as Sheila closed the door and turned down the hall light, she wondered vaguely why Ned had been so silent.

CHAPTER XXV

‘I WILL DO MY BEST, NED’

The most I love when I the least express it :
Deep waters noiseless are ; and this we know,
That chiding streams betray small depth below ;—
So when Love speechless is, she doth express
A depth in love, and that depth bottomless.

HERRICK.

SHEILA was surprised to find how much she missed Betty. Her sunshiny face, her little wise airs and flitting, birdlike motions, even her restlessness, had been always *en évidence*. Not a day passed without their meeting either at The Moorings or the Old Cottage. Sheila, who had become very fond of the child, was not sorry to hear that Betty's visit to Cottingdean was to be limited to three weeks.

Martha explained the matter in her quiet way. Dr. Mortimer's people, who lived at Keswick, were anxious to see the girl he was to marry, and Katie had been invited to Crow's Foot to make acquaintance with her future relatives.

‘Betty writes that Alick, as she calls him—how I wish the child would not call young men by their Christian names’—and Martha looked slightly perturbed—‘but I suppose she means Dr. Mortimer—cannot get away later, so Katie has been obliged to curtail her

visit. But she is to go to them again in November and stay longer, so she does not mind ; and of course father and I will be pleased to have her back.'

This was good news. And when Betty returned Sheila was so unusually demonstrative in her welcome that the little girl quite coloured with pleasure.

'I have enjoyed myself awfully,' she remarked—Betty always enjoyed everything awfully, she never took her pleasures diluted—'but it is nice to be back.'

'We have all wanted you,' returned Sheila, 'and Martha has missed you. I am sure of that, though she never would own it. But we did our best to cheer her up.'

'Marty told me in her letters how good you were to her, and how attentive the Herr Professor was to dear old dad.'

'Mr. Woodford always so enjoys a talk with Ned.'

'Oh yes.' And here Betty flashed an odd little look at Sheila. 'Martha is not looking well ; she has been having one or two bad headaches. I expect the heat has tried her. I don't think she minds my going away ; she always says that she is never dull, and that she and dad are such good company. By the by, Sheila, I came upon your younger brother just now, and I scarcely knew him, he looks so much better.'

'Dr. Moorhouse says he is gaining flesh,' returned Sheila in a tone of satisfaction ; 'we are quite proud of the improvement in him and Tommy. If you met in the lane just now, Nell must have been with him.'

'Yes, and she looked ever so much better too,' went on Betty, who always took a bright view of things. 'Really, Sheila, she has rather a nice face, though I thought her so plain at first. She has such a

sweet smile. And Tommy is a darling. But what an odd little thing Bunnie is.'

'Oh, she is a dear child when you get used to her,' replied Sheila; 'but of course she is not pretty. Ned teases her dreadfully, and calls her "Little Redpoll" or "Carrots," which hurts her feelings. She came to me full of her grievance one day. "I do think Uncle Ned an unkind man," she said; "he laughs at me because I have red hair, and it is wicked of him, because God made it." Of course I had to explain that he was only in fun, but she would not be convinced. "Fun ought to be kind," she said, shaking her curly head in such an old-womanish way, "and I shan't love him if he talks like that." But Ned is just incorrigible, he will not leave off teasing her; and she is always on her dignity with him.'

'Herr Professor is working very hard, is he not?' asked Betty. 'You know he came across to the Cottage while I was unpacking last evening. I found him in the verandah with dad and Martha when I came down. I thought he looked awfully tired.'

Sheila had thought so too; she had been struck by his weary, jaded look when he had joined them at the supper table.

'I asked him if he had begun his new book, but he did not seem to like my asking the question,' went on Betty. 'I thought authors liked talking about their work; but he was quite short with me; he did not exactly tell me to hold my tongue, but he certainly meant it. And Martha changed the subject at once.'

'I wonder what put him out,' ejaculated Sheila; 'you and Ned are such chums, Betty.'

'Well, he was not a bit like himself,' returned the girl frankly. 'I had it out with Martha afterwards,

but she did not seem able to explain things ; she only said that literary people sometimes got tired and irritable over their work, and that perhaps things had not gone smoothly that day, for she had noticed that he seemed a little down and out of sorts. 'Poor old Herr Professor, I never meant to bother him,' finished Betty in an apologetic tone.

Sheila remained silent. She could have thrown a light on the subject. Ned was a little sore on the question of the new book that was to be commenced that autumn. The arrival of Ivor and his family had obliged him to postpone his work indefinitely. 'I could not go up to town now and read at the British Museum,' he had said to her. 'I mean to wait until we see our way clearer. It is not so much the expense. I believe I could manage the three months very cheaply, and the *Circle* pays me well, but I don't mean to leave you with all this on your shoulders—"Tommy and Co.," I mean.'

'Ned, this is absurd,' returned Sheila. 'It is downright wicked of you to be wasting your time like this. Well, not wasting it exactly,' as he looked indignant at this, 'but just writing pot-boiler and magazine articles. As for not leaving me, why, my dear man, how can you talk such nonsense ! As though a strong young woman of my mature age cannot take care of a family without your help ! Did any one ever hear such nonsense ? No, Ned, that won't hold water. There is some counter-attraction, some——'

'Pshaw !' muttered Ned, and he got up so hastily that he kicked over the waste-paper basket and scattered its contents on the carpet, which elicited another growl. Was it the effect of his awkwardness that made Ned so red ?

'The attractions of "Tommy and Co." are too strong,' went on Sheila in a teasing tone, as she picked up the débris. And Ned's face had cleared at once. What was it he had feared she would say?

'Never mind picking up all that rubbish, She. I want you to listen to me a moment. There are reasons why I would rather wait before I begin any fresh work, and I have plenty on hand at present. I have promised the editor another series of articles. They pay awfully well, and keep my hand in. We must just wait to see how Ivor and the children go on. If they settle down comfortably, and I feel you can safely be left with them; I might run up to town in November, but it is useless making plans so long beforehand. At present I feel my place is here.' And Ned spoke in such a masterful tone that Sheila felt that any further argument would be useless.

But she was not quite convinced. 'I am afraid he does not trust Ivor, or he would not be so unwilling to go,' she said to herself. 'Ned's want of confidence rather hurts one, and yet it is only natural. Ned feels that he must assure himself that Ivor has really improved and that he can rely on him—and perhaps he is right. Ned is not the man to shirk his responsibilities. Of course they are a heavy expense to us, but I am managing as well as I can. He can live quite cheaply in those rooms in Heathcote Street, and I do so want him to settle to his new book and be happy. It spoils my pleasure to see him like this.' For once in her life Sheila was unusually dense; she had formulated an idea, and it had taken root in her mind.

She thought that Ned's gravity and unusual depression were partly owing to thwarted plans and partly to his distaste for the visitors quartered on him, but that

his kindness of heart and sense of duty made him put a force on himself.

‘He will never tell them to go as long as he thinks it right to keep them,’ she thought, ‘but he cannot pretend to enjoy Nell’s society. The poor girl gets on his nerves, I can see that, and he does so hate her calling him Mr. Edward. But it is no use my telling her so,’ and Sheila sighed as though she were oppressed.

‘Tommy and Co.’ had been at The Moorings a month now, and, to judge from outward appearances, they seemed a happy family party.

If Ivor were thoroughly content and satisfied with his daily environment, and pleasantly exhilarated by a sense of returning health, Nell was still more blissful. Never in her life had she been so fed and clothed, so richly provided with creature comforts, so absolutely free from care.

Every one was so kind to her and the children. No one asked her to do things she disliked. Sheila was just sweet to her from morning to night ; and even Mr. Edward did nice little things for her, though he did not talk to her as much as to other people. ‘I cannot help feeling that I bore him,’ she said rather sadly to Ivor. ‘Sheila is such a darling, she never makes me feel that with her.’

Sheila would have felt more satisfied with herself if she had heard Nell’s little speech. At night she often took herself to task for impatience. With all her sweet temper, Nell tried her sorely at times. Her lack of refinement, her slow, drawling voice, her constant questions, and untidy, thriftless ways chafed Sheila incessantly.

‘I am ashamed of being so impatient,’ she would say to herself, ‘when the poor thing is trying so hard to improve. Did she not say this very evening, when I

was teaching Bunnie how to put her clothes away tidily, "You are a fortunate little girl, Bunnie, to have a kind aunt to teach you. I had no one to look after me and tell me things"? It is not that she is stupid, but she has been badly brought up. She is never offended when I give her hints, but I cannot be telling her things all day long, and somehow she always does something *gauche* and stupid when Mr. Brett is here. He certainly never sees her at her best.' Perhaps this was the secret grievance. Sheila's nerves were always on edge when Luke Brett paid his long evening visits.

Others were not so blind as Sheila; but no one tried to open her eyes. Luke Brett once dropped a hint half tentatively, to see if she understood him, but he did not follow it up. 'People must dree their own weird, and work out their own salvation, even in the things of this life,' he would say. 'It is no use taking the reins for another person; one might set their little world on fire like Phaeton, and do no good in the end.' And perhaps he was right. Under the cover of neighbourly kindness and sympathy there is often unwarrantable interference and the forcing of secret locks. Sacred places are invaded by well-meaning folk anxious to redress grievances and to put things to rights in their own way. To a certain class of men a board with 'No Thoroughfare' instantly suggests that no short cut could be so desirable; that 'trespassers will be prosecuted' is only a figure of speech, and adds the spice of determination to their self-will.

One morning, about a week after Betty's return, Sheila was struck by Ned's air of dejection. He had slept badly and seemed much out of sorts; he was rather curt in his answers to Ivor, and seemed too much occupied with his correspondence to join in the

general conversation ; and when Tom waddled into the room and tried to climb up on his knee, he put him down gently.

‘Not this morning, old fellow. Dad will give you the top of his egg.’ And then he gathered up his papers hastily and went off to his study.

‘Ned is off his feed this morning,’ observed Ivor in a tone of concern. ‘He has been looking seedy for days. He sits up too late, She ; it was one o’clock when I heard him come in last night.’

‘Oh, Ivor, impossible!’ exclaimed Sheila. ‘Ned never stays at the Old Cottage after ten—nothing would induce him to do so. That was why Kaiser was so restless last night. I heard him going up and down stairs as though he were on the watch. I could hear his tail thump against every step.’

‘It was after one,’ returned Ivor ; ‘I struck a light and looked at my watch. Ned must have been taking his walks abroad for three mortal hours, so no wonder he looks a bit out of sorts.’

Sheila felt vaguely uneasy. She would willingly have hurried through breakfast, but Ivor was in one of his dawdling moods. She made an excuse at last, that Eppie would be waiting for her. She got through her housekeeping duties as quickly as possible, and then made her way to the study.

It was a lovely day, and Ivor had arranged that he and Nell and the children should go to a little shady hollow on the moor, with work and books, and the house would be quiet until luncheon. ‘We shall have it to ourselves,’ she thought as she tapped lightly at her brother’s door and then turned the handle.

Ned was sitting in the easy-chair by the window, but his pipe lay untouched beside him. Something in

his expression filled her with a sudden foreboding—it was the set, pained look of a strong man in trouble.

'Oh, Ned, my dear brother, what is it?'

'I am afraid I can't talk to you this morning, She,' he returned wearily. 'I am—I mean—that I ought to be busy.' But Sheila took no notice of this; she sat down beside him and looked straight into his eyes.

'Dear Ned, you cannot hide it from me, something is troubling you.'

'Perhaps so, but all the same I cannot talk about it.' Ned's lip was a little stiff, as though speech were difficult. 'When a fellow has had no sleep and has walked himself footsore, he is not inclined for conversation. If you left me I might get a nap, Sheila.'

'You shall have a nap presently,' she returned gently; 'they are all going out soon, and then the house will be quiet. Ivor is quite concerned about you, he thinks you are ill.'

'No, I am not ill.'

'He says you did not come in until one in the morning—he struck a light and looked at his watch—it seemed to make him anxious. It is no wonder you are footsore, Ned.'

'Was it so late?' he returned heavily. 'I must have covered a good many miles then, for I left the Old Cottage'—here his voice changed—'exactly at ten. I got up at once and bade them good-night when the grandfather's clock in the hall struck the hour.'

'Them? I thought Mr. Woodford goes upstairs earlier than that. But I forgot Betty.'

'If you insist on accuracy,' observed Ned irritably, 'Miss Bettina went upstairs with her father. I meant that I bade Miss Woodford good-night when it struck ten. Will that satisfy you?' But Ned's eyes dropped

before Sheila's clear look. The light had come to her at last—Ned's face, and still more his manner, had told her the truth.

'Oh, Ned, dear, dear Ned, I never thought of this! I never imagined it for a moment!' Sheila's hands were on his shoulders, and her eyes were full of tears. 'Is it really true that you and Martha care for each other?'

'It is most certainly true'—but there was no exultation in Ned's voice.

'And I never knew it or guessed it!' exclaimed Sheila. 'Oh, how blind and dense I have been! My dearest friend too—the one of all others I would love to have for a sister! Ned, I think it is just splendid of you not to care for outward beauty and appearance. I am proud of you for making such a choice.' But Ned put up his hand with a gesture of pain, and at that moment they heard Ivor's voice under the window; he was calling to Nell to hurry up.

'Wait a moment until they are gone,' he whispered, 'and then I will explain things'; and Sheila nodded as though she understood. Her whole soul was strangely thrilled with an excitement that bordered on pain, and which yet held some ingredient of sweetness. At that moment she was far too agitated to analyse her own feelings. Surprise at her own slowness of vision was her dominant idea.

'What could have made me so blind?' she was asking herself as the perambulator grated on the rough gravel. 'I have been too much occupied with Ivor and the children to notice Ned as closely as usual.' But never once did she say to herself, 'I was thinking too much of Luke Brett.'

As the footsteps and voices passed into the lane,

and a strange stillness pervaded the old house, Ned roused himself.

'Why do you praise me for making such a choice?' he asked in a tone she had never heard from him before, it was so full of repressed passion. 'It is I who am not worthy of her. Ah, you do not know her, Sheila, though you speak of her as your dearest friend; not as I do—not as I do,' his voice sinking into a whisper.

Sheila felt a quick throb of pain. Was it jealousy? Could it be her chum, her house-mate, her dear old philosophic Ned who was speaking in that tone of another woman? Sheila could not have uttered a word at that moment, until she had crushed down the unworthy feeling.

'Have you cared for her long?' she asked timidly at last.

'Long? How do I know? Upon my soul, Sheila, I could not tell you. From the first I felt drawn to her—it rested me somehow to talk to her—but I never dreamed it would come to this. I was content to drift through the summer days—to be near her and serve her in little ways. I never discovered what it meant until Ivor came to us, and then the whole thing became so involved in difficulties that I was almost in despair. How was I to marry with such a millstone round my neck. "Tommy and Co." were precious heavy, I can tell you, She'; and Ned's laugh was singularly unmirthful.

'My dear old fellow, and you have been bearing all this burden alone?'

'I have been kicking against it, you mean. The worst of this sort of thing is that it grows, and gives a man no peace. It has come to this, that I cannot live without her. Oh, you may look at me, She. Of

course it is a sort of madness—a man in my state of mind is not in a normal condition. It seems to me that there is only one thing I want, and that is to make Martha Woodford my wife.'

'But surely, dear, you can tell her so.' Sheila was distinctly puzzled; difficulties there might be, but they could be overcome with time and patience. If a man loved a woman, it was clearly his duty to tell her so. Sheila was quite clear on that point. Let them understand each other and nothing else much mattered. Sheila's creed was perfectly simple.

'Yes, I could tell her so; but it has done no good. Listen, Sheila. Last night we were left alone—we are not often alone, you know—and I asked her to marry me. I told her that I would wait for her any time.'

'Well, dear?'

'And she refused me.'

'Oh no, impossible!'

'Oh, she cares for me right enough—I made her own that. But she persists that she will never marry; that her father is her first duty, and that Betty might leave them at any time. She cried so bitterly and begged me to say no more, that I had to leave her. Sheila'—in a tone almost of despair, and Ned turned his tired face to her—'what is to be done? How am I to marry with all these helpless creatures depending on me? That is what Martha says. She says if she cared for me ever so, she would never consent to be a drag on me.'

'Dear Ned, what can I say?'

'What can you say?' Ned's voice was irritable with pain. 'You must help us. You must go to her and talk things over with her. Tell her that my heart is set on this; that I can work, and that I am making

my name. Mr. Woodford has a little annuity; he would not be utterly dependent on me—and he is very frail. But perhaps you had better not say that. Tell her that I will wait any reasonable time, but there must be a definite engagement. You are her friend, Sheila, she will be guided by you.' And Ned looked at her so beseechingly that Sheila's reluctance melted away.

'I will do my best, Ned,' she said gently. And then they talked over things more calmly.

CHAPTER XXVI

‘WHY DO YOU CALL HIM “HE”?’

There are sweet surprises awaiting many a humble soul fighting against great odds in the battle of a seemingly commonplace life.—ANON.

THE morning passed away so quickly that Sheila was startled to hear the children's voices as the returning party made their way up the lane. They had talked all these hours, and it was actually luncheon time; no wonder Sheila looked and felt a little weary.

‘Have I helped you, Ned?’ she asked rather wistfully, as she rose from her seat.

‘You always help me,’ he said gratefully. ‘One can always depend on you, She; whatever the rest of the world may do, you never disappoint me.’ Then Sheila smiled happily.

All these hours she had not thought of herself, only of him. That Ned should have his heart's desire, that the woman he loved should be his wife, this was the one thing for which she craved. That Martha was robbing her of her house-mate, that she and Ned would never be all in all to each other again—these thoughts had not yet come to her.

‘What does it matter what becomes of me,’ she said to herself, ‘if only my dear old Ned is happy? I am strong, I can work; Ned need not fear that I shall

be a burden on him. I will give up my place gladly to Martha when the right time comes.'

But when Sheila hinted at this, Ned turned upon her quite fiercely ; indeed it must be owned that he did not at all measure his words.

'If you are going to talk such rot as that, She,' he said angrily, 'we had better drop the discussion. Do you suppose that my wife will turn my only sister out of doors—that I should allow you to live under any roof but mine?'

Sheila bit her lip. Ned was sometimes so impossible ! The dear fellow was so dense—how was she to explain, without hurting him, that under those circumstances she would greatly prefer to be independent?

'In my opinion, a wife and husband are better alone,' was all she ventured to say ; and though Ned did not contradict this, he reiterated his remark in a still more forcible manner : 'that as long as he had a roof and a crust of bread, they should be shared with his sister.'

Sheila held her peace, but she was not convinced. Her will was as strong as Ned's. When Martha became mistress at The Moorings, it would no longer be her home. 'Ned must be crazy,' she said to herself ; 'does he suppose that I should let him work for me? I would rather go and live with Ivor and Nell, and put up with all her shiftless ways, than stay here.' But her heart sank a little at the thought. 'Oh, the changes and chances of this mortal life!' she sighed.

Ned's face had lost its harassed expression ; his sister's affectionate sympathy had cheered him, and he seemed disposed to take a more sanguine view of his difficulties.

‘After all, I have a house and between six and seven hundred a year, and I am getting on with my literary work,’ he had said almost cheerfully. ‘Ivor cannot expect me to maintain his family.’

‘Of course not.’

‘We must wait a little until he gets a berth, and perhaps even then I may have to help him a bit. I could spare him a hundred a year, She.’

‘Perhaps so.’ Sheila was a little guarded in her answers. It was no use being over-sanguine. In all probability “Tommy and Co.” would be a heavy drag on them for years to come; poor Ivor was only a feckless laddie, and Nell would always be helpless. And then there was Mr. Woodford a confirmed invalid, and Betty, who would not be married to her faithful Charlie for years, and who could not be trusted to look after the old man.

If Ned married Martha, he would have responsibilities enough. Sheila was too shy to hint that in course of time he might have children of his own. ‘Ned is an old bachelor, he does not realise what it all means,’ she said to herself; ‘he is only thinking of Martha. By and by his eyes will be open, and then he will be more reasonable.’ But Sheila loved him all the more for his boyish impetuosity.

To strike when the iron is hot is a wise axiom, and Sheila resolved to go to the Old Cottage that very afternoon. She remembered that Betty and her father were going to have tea at the vicarage, and that she would certainly find Martha alone.

Sheila made arrangements for every one’s comfort before she left. Ned was persuaded to betake himself to a hammock in the fir plantation, and Ivor followed his example; and Nell carried the children off to the

tennis-lawn, promising to come back and make tea at the proper time. Sheila would probably have hers at the Old Cottage.

Sheila knew that she would find Martha working in the verandah. As usual, Miss Mowcher gave her a fussy welcome—she was a demonstrative little animal—and then Martha came forward to greet her visitor.

It was with difficulty that Sheila suppressed an exclamation when she saw her, she was so shocked at her appearance. Martha was very pale, and her eyelids were swollen, as though she had wept half the night. She seemed to shrink a little from Sheila's questioning glance.

'I have had a headache,' she said hurriedly, 'but it is better now. Have you come to have tea with me, Sheila? It is good of you to enliven my solitude.' Martha spoke with effort, as though she were putting a strong force on herself. She was evidently nervous and ill at ease.

'I have come to talk to you,' returned Sheila. Perhaps her tone was somewhat significant, for a faint colour stole into Martha's face as she took up her work again. 'How nice and quiet it is here; we shall have no one to interrupt us. I left Ned and Ivor swinging in their hammocks. I think Ned has a headache too, he has slept badly.'

'I am very sorry,' and Martha caught her thread so quickly that it broke.

'I think he overwalked himself last night,' went on Sheila; 'for he never came home until one o'clock in the morning. Poor Kaiser was in a dreadful state, and Ivor heard him come in. Did you ever hear of such giddy ways, Martha, for a staid philosopher?'

'He left here at ten.' Martha spoke calmly, but

her hand shook so that she could scarcely hold her needle. Sheila quietly drew the work away.

‘Why do you bother yourself over that,’ she said quickly. ‘I want your whole attention, dear. You are not a bit yourself this afternoon; do you think I do not see that? I am not quite as blind as a bat, Martha. You are not really glad to see me; in your heart you would much rather be alone.’

‘Sheila, what can make you say such things? Am I ever anything but glad to see you? I daresay I am stupid this afternoon, but I slept badly.’

‘Ned slept badly too.’ It was impossible to ignore the significance of Sheila’s tone, and poor Martha grew crimson.

‘I am sorry,’ was all she could say; but it was evident that she could not meet Sheila’s eyes.

‘It was Ned who asked me to come. He was very anxious that I should talk to you. Dear Martha, won’t you look at me? You have made him so unhappy—I have never seen him in such a state before.’

‘Hush, Sheila, for pity’s sake’—and Martha hid her face in her hands. She was trembling all over, but Sheila was merciless.

‘Why should I hush when I have so much to say, and Ned begged me so hard to come? We are friends, Martha, and should surely understand each other. Ned is the dearest thing on earth to me. We have stood shoulder to shoulder through many a rough day; we are more than brother and sister, we are trusty comrades. When I was a girl I used to call him my mate.’

‘Yes, I know, he told me so.’

‘It was more than that he told you last night. Martha, be frank with me, why did you refuse him?’

He loves you so dearly, and he has never loved any woman before.' But how could Martha answer when her voice was choked with sobs?

'You have nearly broken his heart,' she continued, after a minute's interval. But her voice was soft with pity; her womanly instinct told her that Martha had almost broken hers. 'Dear, I know that you care for him—these tears are eloquent enough—and that you did not mean to be cruel. You are so gentle that you would not hurt any living creature if you could help it; you must have good reason for your refusal.'

'Thank you for saying that, Sheila'; and Martha dried her eyes and tried to regain her self-control. 'It was hard, terribly hard, to say "No" to him. But in my heart I prayed to God to give me strength to say it.'

Sheila looked at her in mute reverence. She could pray at such a moment, with her lover's passionate pleading in her ears! In her place could she have done likewise? Sheila felt a sudden sting of shame, as though some inward voice were accusing her.

'Was it absolutely necessary to refuse him, if you really loved him?' she asked, after an interval of silence.

The poor girl looked at her reproachfully. She was certainly plainer than ever at that moment, with her flushed face and reddened eyelids, but the loveliness of sincerity and truth shone in her eyes. 'If—oh, Sheila, do you doubt it?' Martha's voice trembled as she spoke.

'Dear Martha, I did not mean to hurt you.'

'No, of course not; and how are you to understand? It is all my foolishness. But indeed I have no wish to hide things from you. If you only knew what I felt when he told me that he loved me. I, who never expected that any man would ever look at me a second

time ; I, who imagined that I was set apart from such things.'

'Dear, you have always thought too little of yourself.'

'I think not, Sheila. Could I look in the glass and think that any man would not be repelled by my homely features? But when he said it, and I saw his face, it was as though heaven opened, and I felt so happy, it was just the sweetest moment of my life. It was then that he drew from me the avowal that his love was returned.'

'I am glad you told him that.'

'I think now that it was a mistake ; but he was so insistent, and I was not quite mistress of myself. But the next moment the happy dream was over. It was then that I told him that I must not marry ; that my father and Betty were sacred charges ; that it would be impossible for me to leave them.'

'I can imagine Ned's answer to this—Ned is a Quixotic sort of person.'

'But can you conceive anything more rash or recklessly generous?' and there was a sudden gleam of tender amusement in Martha's sad eyes. 'Your brother actually suggested that we should all migrate to The Moorings.'

'Now—at once?' Sheila looked rather taken aback at this.

'Oh no, there was method in his madness. Of course, he added when his brother had a home of his own. Oh, Sheila, of course you look surprised. It was just the most impossible idea. Do you think I do not know how heavily he is handicapped, and how hard he works?'

Sheila's answer was a little irrelevant.

'Why do you call him "he," Martha? He can surely be "Ned" between us.'

Martha's shielding hand prevented Sheila from seeing her face.

'I could never call him that,' she said in an embarrassed tone.

'Well, Edward, then.'

'No, I could not do it. He is Mr. Lassiter to me. But I like him to call me Martha; there can be no harm in that. We are dear friends; I pray heaven we always shall be.'

'I say "Amen" to that with all my heart. But now, my dear girl, putting feelings aside, I am by no means sure that you were right to refuse my poor old Ned. Let us think it out, as he is fond of saying, and get to the bottom of our difficulties. I don't deny there are difficulties, but I absolutely refuse to spell the word impossibility.'

'There I do not agree with you.' But Sheila hurried on.

'I am not saying that Ned, at the present moment, is quite in a position to marry. To be sure, he has a house and a nice little income, but Ivor and his family will have to be kept for a time. Indeed, they are likely to be a heavy expense for the next year or two.'

'Even your brother admitted that, Sheila.'

'Of course he could not deny it. And under these circumstances you must both be prepared for a long engagement.' Martha looked at her blankly.

'But I refused him, you know that.'

'Oh yes, I know it well; but, all the same, you ought not to have done it. But of course Ned will not take such an answer. He is very persistent when he has set his heart on a thing. I should not be the

least surprised if he goes over the ground again when he next sees you. I am his ambassador, remember that.'

'Sheila, how can you! You are two against one, and it is not fair. But I will not be coerced; I must do what I think is right for him. Do you suppose,' here her voice dropped and softened, 'that I would not love to belong to him? If I knew that I were to be engaged to him for twenty years, I should be so thankful and content. Could I love him and not feel this? But it would not be good for him.'

'I think you would hardly wait as long as that!'

'Oh, I was putting it strongly; but even you cannot deny that there would be years of waiting. Listen to me a moment. I have been thinking about it all night, and every hour it seemed more hopeless. Your brother has an income, you say. I know all about that; it is just sufficient to keep you all in comfort.'

'You may leave me out of the category, Martha.'

'What, are you going to be married?' in quite an eager tone. Then it was Sheila's turn to blush.

'No, no. What do you mean? What absurd notion have you got in your head? I only meant that I am a working woman, and that I shall never be a burden on Ned.'

'I think it is you who are talking nonsense, Sheila. I wonder what your brother would say if he heard you. But let me finish, please, or Jane will be in with the tea. I know that just now he is thinking of settling to some new work, he has spoken about it more than once, and I remember that he said that he would have to give up his remunerative work for the next year or two.'

'Oh, he told you that, did he?'

'Yes, he made it quite plain to me. He must be

free to do his work. There must be no talk of any engagement between us. My father is broken in health and spirits, and I am absolutely necessary to him, and my little Betty is not likely to marry yet.'

Sheila was silent a moment. In spite of her very real sympathy with the lovers, her common-sense told her that under existing circumstances it would be most unwise for Ned to assume further responsibilities.

Perhaps Martha was right in insisting that there should be no engagement for the present. Ned was not the man to content himself with his lover's privileges. He would be urgent for an early marriage, and override all Martha's scruples and conscientious objections. The atmosphere of The Moorings would be disturbed and agitated by ceaseless plans. 'We should all be as unrestful as possible,' she said to herself, 'and Martha would grow thin with worry.'

'I see what you mean,' she observed presently. 'You think that things ought to be left as they are for the present, and perhaps from your point of view you are right.'

'I am quite sure that I am right, Sheila.'

'Perhaps so, but all the same what are we to do with Ned?'

'How do you mean, dear?'

'Ned is rather an awkward customer, and there is no use making up a pleasing little fiction about him.'

'I wish you would explain yourself, Sheila.'

'Well, it is just this. When you refused Ned last night, I daresay you said to him that you hoped to remain dear friends and all that sort of thing.'

'Why, yes, I think I did say something of the kind; but he would not listen. Indeed, I meant it, Sheila.'

'No doubt you meant it; but, my dear girl, you

have not lived with Ned all these years or you would not propose anything so preposterous. Do you suppose that Ned will bear his life, living at The Moorings with you at his very gate? Martha'—and Sheila's voice became very sad—'if you refuse to be engaged to him, I know well that Ned will be driven from his home. He will have no heart for his work here. He will leave us all and go to Heathcote Street, to those dull, poky little rooms, and work night and day, and take no care of himself.'

'Oh no, Sheila, impossible!'

'I am telling you the truth. I know him so well, and this is what he will do, Martha. I want to do what is best for you both. You are right, but we have to reckon with him. Let me go back and tell him that I agree with you; that, for the present, things must be left as they are; but that, in six months, if he wishes to reopen the subject, you will not refuse to listen to him. In six months' time we may see things more clearly, and this will not bind you to any definite answer.'

'Are you sure of that?'

'Yes, I am quite certain of it. Dear Martha, you know that you can trust me. I am on Ned's side—in a sense I am his accredited ambassador—but in my inmost heart I am on your side too. Quick, give me an answer, for I hear the jingle of tea-cups.'

'If you really think it will be right,' returned Martha dubiously. 'Yes,' she continued hastily, as Jane approached, 'tell him that I will not refuse to listen if he speaks to me again in six months, even—even if I have to give the same answer'; but there was an unmistakable look of relief on Martha's face as she said this.

CHAPTER XXVII

HERR PROFESSOR'S PLANS

For him who aspires, and for him who loves, life may lead through the thorns, but it never stops in the desert.—ANON.

Fulfil the perfection of long-suffering ; be thou patient.—*Teaching of Buddha.*

SHEILA did not remain long after this. Martha needed rest, and was anxious to efface all traces of her emotion before her father and Betty returned, and they might be expected back at any moment. Sheila drank her tea hastily, and then took her leave.

‘I have had about enough of it,’ she said to herself as she walked across the lane, for there was a dull throbbing at her temples. ‘I do hope Ned will be reasonable. He has a little of the bulldog in his nature—he never lets go.’

Ned was on the look-out for her. He was leaning on the gate, with his straw hat tilted over his eyes, watching for her. Directly he saw her, he unlatched the gate, and taking her arm, turned her in the direction of the links.

‘Oh, Ned,’ she objected, ‘I am so tired, and it is so hot out here.’

‘It will be quite cool and fresh on the links. Why, it is half-past five—you have been such an age, Sheila’ ;

and Ned's voice was rather reproachful. 'It is no use trying for a quiet corner in the gardens; the kids are all over the place—they are playing hide-and-seek with Ivor.'

'Did you have a good nap, Ned?'

'Oh, fairish!' Which was shabby of Ned, for he had slept soundly for at least an hour and a half. 'Well, She,' in a distinctly injured tone, 'how long are you going to keep me on thorns?' And then Sheila, with a few prudent reservations, repeated the substance of her conversation with Martha.

She was rather disappointed by the way Ned received it. It must be confessed that he was somewhat unreasonable; he was so argumentative and wrathful that Sheila more than once put up her hand to her head. 'Enough is as good as a feast,' she said to herself wearily; 'Ned is surfeiting me.'

'Six months!' he repeated for the seventh or eighth time, 'and I am not to speak to her before that! And yet you declare that she cares for me!'

'Most certainly she cares for you. It will make you vainer and more masterful to say it, but I do believe, Ned, that Martha loves you with her whole heart.'

'Pshaw!' rather roughly. 'I confess I can't see the proof of your words. Would she refuse to engage herself to me, and put me off in this ridiculous manner, if she really cared for me?'

'Speaking as a woman, and knowing Martha's intense sense of duty, I should say she would, Ned—that she would be capable of any amount of self-sacrifice.'

Then he said 'Pshaw!' again and 'Feminine rubbish!' under his breath, but his manner softened a little.

'Martha would do what she thought right now

and always,' continued Sheila boldly, 'and I love and honour her for it.' But this was a little too much for Ned.

'There you go, She ; I believe you encouraged her in her morbid ideas instead of taking my part. I was wrong to employ a go-between, I ought to have gone myself. There was the opportunity, and I never took it. I was a fool not to do my own business. She got the better of me last night, but this afternoon I would have made her listen to me.'

'You would have done no good, Ned,' returned Sheila. 'I talked for an hour, until I was hoarse, before I could win even this concession. Martha has a strong will, she is very firm. If she were a weaker woman, Ned, and not so good and conscientious, you would have more chance with her.'

Her words seemed to strike Ned, and his wrath died away. Sheila was so patient with him, and she looked so tired.

'You are sure that you really did your best, She ?'

'Yes, Ned.'

'And I am not to speak to her on the subject for six months ?'

Sheila nodded. Then a moment later she said quickly—

'Martha does not promise to give you a different answer even then.'

'I daresay not'—here a grim smile came to Ned's face. 'Well, She, I must not bother you any more. I am sorry I was impatient just now. Of course you did your best. Why, my dear, do you suppose that I am such a mean beggar that I don't realise that? It is only that a man sees things sometimes from a different standpoint.'

‘Yes, dear, I know that,’ and Sheila passed her hand caressingly over his coat-sleeve ; ‘and Martha knows it too.’

‘You must leave me to deal with Martha,’ he returned hastily. ‘But you did your best, my dear, and I thank you for it. Well, I accept the conditions, though in my heart I protest against them. Let me see, this is the 7th of September ; I will write to Mrs. Williams and engage those rooms in Heathcote Street for the beginning of October.’

‘Three weeks hence — O Ned !’ and her hand tightened round his wrist. Of course she knew it, she had told Martha so—Ned would be driven from his home.

‘You will not mind my going, She?’ and Ned looked at her imploringly. ‘I could not stay here like this. How could I work ? It would drive me mad. Every day we must meet—here, at the Old Cottage, in the lane, everywhere—she could not avoid me. If I look at her she will shrink into herself ; when we talk we shall be like strangers. I could not face the situation. Let me go, Sheila. I daresay I am a coward, but it will be far better for us all.’

‘Dear Ned, of course you shall go.’ Sheila’s voice was quite steady, and she did not hesitate for a moment.

‘You said yourself some weeks ago that you could be left with Ivor. You spoke then as though you wanted me to go—as though you thought I was wasting my time.’

‘Yes, I remember, Ned. But tell me one thing—and now her eyes were wistful—‘shall you stay away the whole winter?’

‘Yes, I think so. At least’—as he saw her wince—

'I cannot tell, we need not bother our heads about that. Of course I shall run down now and then to have a look at you, and see how you all get on without me.'

'That will be nice'; but something in Sheila's voice made Ned look at her rather keenly. His conscience was not quite easy, for after a few minutes he said in a worried manner—

'What a muddle it all is! But for "Tommy and Co.," I could have taken you with me. You would have liked that, She?'

'I always like to be with you, dear,' she answered gently. But why did Ned's words seem to give her a sudden stab? Why was the idea of leaving The Moorings for a few months such an unwelcome suggestion? But Sheila would not face the question; she covered it up hastily, and turned her attention to the point they were discussing.

'You will promise to take care of yourself, Ned; you will not work too hard?'

'Oh, as to that, I will make no promises,' he returned carelessly. 'Under some circumstances work is a man's salvation; anything is better than mooning about in an objectless fashion. Do you know, She,' kicking a pebble restlessly as he spoke, 'I can scarcely believe I am the same man, the same Edward Lassiter who lived in Brook Street, the would-be philosopher and contented old bachelor. I have not grown younger in looks, have I, and yet in a sense I seem to have renewed my youth?'

She looked at him a moment without speaking. Yes, he was changed; she could not deny that the thin intellectual face had grown thinner and sharper; but there was a new energy in his manner, and an added

brightness in his eyes ; in spite of his very real despondency, the knowledge that his affection was returned by the woman he loved was sweetening the pain of parting. Sheila evidently felt the truth of her words, when she said presently—

‘I don’t think you are to be pitied, Ned. I believe things will come right after a time, if you will only be patient. Of course it is not pleasant to wait ; but you must try and make the best of it.’ And Ned assented to this ; and by and by, to Sheila’s great relief, he proposed that they should go in.

Sheila felt both weary and depressed,—it had been a trying day. During supper she made a heroic effort to be cheerful for Ned’s sake, but Nell’s want of tact spoilt everything.

‘You are eating nothing, Sheila,’ she said with fussy affection, ‘and I am sure you have a bad head. Why don’t you give her a glass of wine, Mr. Edward, it will do her more good than lemonade?’ And thus adjured, Ned would have filled his sister’s glass, but she prevented him.

‘I could not touch it, Ned. No, I really mean it. I have asked Eppie to make me a strong cup of coffee. Yes,’ as Ned looked at her anxiously, ‘Nell is right and my head does ache a little. If you and Ivor do not mind, I will go out in the garden while you finish supper.’

How thankful Sheila was for that brief solitude ! How soft and healing was the September breeze as it fanned her heated temples ! She was too tired to think ; it was rest just to lean back in her chair and be silent. Some wood-pigeons were cooing in the distance, the bleating of sheep sounded from a meadow near, there were children’s voices coming up Sandy Lane. A dog

barked, a pettish little bark from Miss Mowcher answered it; then a tall black figure came between her and the gate. Sheila put down her coffee-cup with a hand that shook slightly; she had not expected Luke Brett that evening. Even as he came towards her, she could hear her brothers' footsteps in the hall; they were already coming out of the dining-room. As Luke paused beside her, it was still light enough to see her face.

'You are not well?' with an air of grave concern.

'My head ached, and I could not eat my supper, so I came out here. Is it not a lovely evening, Mr. Brett? I believe September is my favourite month.'

'You think it is the "good wine" of the year,' he answered smilingly, 'left last to mellow. Ah, here come your brothers, and I have no time to ask what is troubling you. It is a worry headache—do you think I cannot see that?' And before Sheila could make any reply, he was shaking hands with Ned and Ivor, and Ned was giving orders to Ruth to bring out another cup of coffee; and then they all settled themselves as usual, and Peter, who was on the friendliest terms with Sheila, squatted contentedly on her dress.

Sheila was thankful to be spared any reply to Luke's speech; she knew how impossible it would be to hoodwink him. He knew, without a word from her, that she was depressed and weary; and perhaps his clear insight told him that it would be kinder to leave her alone, so he made no attempt to draw her into the conversation. But, as the September dusk grew deeper, and the firs behind them looked like an inky blot, and the lights shone out from the windows of the Old Cottage, Luke Brett noticed two things.

First, he saw Ned draw his chair a little nearer to

his sister, and that, as he laid down his pipe, his hand seemed to feel for hers ; and the next moment, as Ruth lighted the hall lamp, he saw something else : he saw Sheila put Ned's hand to her lips ; but quickly, secretly, as though she were almost ashamed of the action, and hold it tightly to her breast. But in a few more minutes he rose.

'I must make my visit a short one to-night,' he said easily, 'for I have some letters to write before I sleep.' And then, as usual, Ned announced his intention of taking a prowl.

'I shall not be late, She,' he said as he bade his sister good-night ; 'don't you trouble your head about me.'

'He will soon know all about it,' thought Sheila as she went to her room. 'Ned has no intention of saying anything, but before he knows what he is about he will be telling him everything.' And Sheila was right.

Ned was in that nervous, restless condition that it was a relief to talk. A quiet question or two from the vicar soon elicited the fact that he was going up to town. Mr. Brett easily guessed the cause, and before long he was in possession of the truth.

Oddly enough, Luke's first words almost coincided with Sheila's.

'I honour you for your choice, Lassiter. In my opinion, Miss Woodford is one of the best women I know. Her devotion to her father and sister is quite perfect.' Ned was silent, but inwardly he was glowing with satisfaction ; Luke Brett's good opinion was worth having.

'And you think I am doing right ?' he asked after a moment's silence.

'Yes, under the circumstances most men would do

the same. But I confess'—here his manner changed a little—'that I am sorry for your sister.'

Ned nodded and puffed away at his pipe, for they were in the vicar's study by this time.

'She will make the best of it,' he observed presently ; 'she knows that it cannot be helped. Of course I shall run down for a week-end now and then.' He broke off here, and added a moment later, 'I think it will make things easier for Miss Woodford. The whole thing is so confoundedly awkward.'

'Well, perhaps you are right. There is one thing I want to say, Lassiter, but it is for yourself only, mind. From something Dr. Moorhouse told me, I believe Mr. Woodford is in a far more critical condition than his daughters know. It is quite true that he may live for years, but, on the other hand, there might be some sudden seizure,—it is not a good life ; I think that was the expression.'

'I am quite sure that Miss Woodford has no idea of this.'

'I daresay not ; she has quite enough anxiety as it is. Of course you know that Mr. Woodford's friends and advisers invested a certain sum in an annuity which will die with him, and that practically his daughters will be left penniless ?'

'That does not matter, does it ? Miss Bettina is to marry young Allen, you know.'

'Yes, but not until he has a decent income. I only mention all this for your guidance. It will make no difference to you, but it will help to convince you that Miss Woodford is wise in her decision,—it is impossible for her to leave her father. I will go further and say, that it would be hardly right for her to do so. It is a waiting game, Lassiter.'

‘It is not pleasant waiting for dead men’s shoes,’ replied Ned gloomily. But Luke soon made him take a more cheerful view of the case. His last words as he took leave of him were as follows :

‘Don’t look too far ahead ; stick to your work and keep a good heart. After all, I don’t feel inclined to waste any sympathy on you ; you have the satisfaction of knowing that your affection is returned—that one day, please God, the woman you love will be your wife. You will not have to serve your seven years like Jacob, I am quite sure of that.’

‘I hope not.’

‘No, you may be certain of that ; but still you may have to be patient for a long time. But all the same, I think you are to be envied. Good-night, and pleasant dreams to you.’ But Luke Brett sighed as he closed the door and went back to his solitary study.

Ned repeated part of this conversation to Sheila the next day. She was glad that Ned had opened his heart to so wise a counsellor, and she was also relieved that Luke Brett was in possession of the facts.

‘Shall you tell Martha that you are going away?’ she asked presently. Then Ned’s face clouded a little.

‘I think you had better tell her,’ he said, after a moment’s consideration. ‘But there is no hurry, I am not going yet’ ; and Sheila was willing enough to defer the unwelcome communication.

Ned did not wholly cease his visits to the Old Cottage—to do so would have raised Mr. Woodford’s suspicions—but he confessed to Sheila that they were more pain than pleasure. When it was possible, Martha always absented herself on these occasions ; or if she

were compelled to remain, her evident nervousness and constraint made him afraid to address her. But for Betty, Ned would have found his position intolerable.

Perhaps Betty's bright eyes had found out the truth, for she threw herself gallantly into the breach. When the silence threatened to be irksome, when Herr Professor's brow grew puckered with suppressed irritability, Betty chattered on, in her blithe, childish way, of anything and everything under the sun; and both Ned and Martha thanked her in their hearts.

A fortnight passed before Sheila found an opportunity of speaking to Martha about Ned's departure. She would not have said anything then but for a blundering speech of Nell's.

Martha had come across one afternoon. Sheila had a shrewd suspicion that she had seen Ned go up Sandy Lane in the direction of the village, and thought herself safe; in reality he had only gone as far as the pillar-box, and returned almost directly. He looked so surprised and pleased at seeing Martha sitting in the fir parlour with his sister and Nell that the poor girl grew crimson with nervousness, and Sheila said quickly, 'Martha came to sit with us a little because she thought Nell and I were alone.' Sheila said this to put Martha more at her ease, but the speech proved an unfortunate one.

'We shall always be alone,' observed Nell in a discontented tone, 'when Mr. Edward goes to London. We shall miss him dreadfully, shan't we, Sheila? Ivor is quite low about it.'

Martha turned very pale. 'You are going away?' she said in a low voice, and she looked straight at Ned. 'This is rather sudden, is it not?'

'I have that work to do,' he returned evasively. 'X

cannot get on with it here ; I have taken rooms near the British Museum for a few months.' Ned did not meet her eyes as he spoke. 'Sheila,' he continued hastily, 'I must just go in and write another note ; let me know when tea is ready'—and then he left them.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE IVY PERGOLA

Better to feel a love within
Than be lovely to the sight !
Better a homely tenderness
Than beauty's wild delight !
MACDONALD.

As Ned turned away Martha lowered her sunshade, but not before Sheila saw that her lips were trembling like a child on the verge of crying. That look of helpless pain touched her ; the next moment she put her hand on her arm.

‘I want you to come with me, Martha dear,’ she said cheerfully. ‘I must show you the new fernery that we are making in that waste bit of ground near the coach-house ; nothing but hardy ferns seem to grow there.’ Then Martha rose at once and followed her silently. Nell looked after them wistfully, but she did not attempt to join them.

‘They think I don’t see,’ she said to herself, ‘but I am not quite so dense and stupid as that. Well, she is a nice creature, but whatever Mr. Edward can see in her to make himself so miserable passes my comprehension. I was not much to look at myself when Ivor and I took up with each other—and he has more than

once told me so—but there, I was a beauty compared to Miss Woodford.'

The low, ivy-covered pergola leading to the kitchen garden was a safe retreat from prying eyes, and though the study window overlooked it, the clearest vision could not have penetrated the dense foliage. Here Sheila stopped.

'Martha dearest, I meant to have told you,' she said gently; 'I had no idea Nell would blurt it out like that. Ned said there was no hurry; and indeed there was no good in worrying you beforehand, so I put it off. He is not going until the middle of next week.'

'You were right, Sheila,' returned Martha sadly, and a tear rolled down her cheek; 'you said that he would be driven away from his home. It is my doing, and I cannot help myself, and—and I cannot bear it. I am bringing unhappiness to you and him, but it is not my fault.'

'My dear, do you think I do not know that? You must not be morbid about it, Martha. I do not deny that Ned is very much worried just now, but your burden is quite as heavy as his. Ned will have his work to occupy his thoughts—after a time he will settle down and get interested; indeed, it is better for him to go away for a little.'

'But you will be so dull without him, Sheila.'

'I shall miss him, of course. Ned is my chum, and we have never been separated since he left Oxford. But I have Ivor, and I don't mean to fret about it. Come, Martha, you must not look like that—you must be brave.'

'If only he is not angry with me,' she whispered; 'but he will not look at me to-day or speak to me. Sheila'—putting her hand to her breast—'if you only

knew the pain I have here. It is not his going away—in some respects that will be a relief—but to know that I am wounding him when I love him so, it is this that is so unbearable.'

How Sheila would have answered this pathetic speech she never knew; for at that moment, to her extreme surprise, Ned's tall figure blocked up the entrance to the pergola, and with the instinctive feeling that they would arrive at a more comfortable understanding if they were left alone, she fled down the grass walk and took refuge in the garden-room, where the children were having their tea under Eppie's supervision. Bunnie looked at her in surprise.

'Have you been running, auntie?' putting down her slice of bread and jam; 'you do look so hot, and you breathe like Kaiser does when he wants a drink of water.'

'Kaiser is dreadful thirsty,' observed Tommy solemnly; 'he drinks and drinks until his pan is dry, and then he wags his tail for more. Thank God for my good tea; and I want to come into your lap, auntie, and hear the story of the three little bears.'

Meanwhile Ned was blocking up the entrance to the pergola, like a gigantic Fee-fo-fum; while Martha, deserted so basely by her friend, stood there unable to speak or move—'like a poor little pink-eyed rabbit in a boa-constrictor's cage,' Ned told her long afterwards.

'Holloa, why is Sheila running away like that?' he asked; and as his eyes became more used to the dim light in that dusky retreat, his manner changed. 'Why have you been crying, Martha?' in quite a peremptory voice.

'I have not,' she stammered, completely taken aback by this direct question. She had no intention

of evading the truth, but she was quite unconscious that a tear had been shed.

‘Why, there are tears in your eyes now’—for he had detected the wet lashes. And then, before Martha could draw back, he put his hand under her chin and turned her face to the light. ‘Is it because I am going away?’ and then he kissed her.

Ned told himself afterwards that he had never been more surprised at himself. ‘It is the unexpected that happens. Who would have thought that a shy fellow like me would have done such an audacious thing? I never thought of kissing her that day she refused me, and yet she was shedding oceans of tears then.’

Audacious or not, the fact remained; for while Sheila was relating the story of the three little bears to a sticky but appreciative audience, Martha was hiding her hot face on Ned’s shoulder, and entreating his forgiveness for the pain she was causing him.

‘Then you are not crying because I am going away?’ he persisted, for he was determined to get to the bottom of this. He was very well satisfied with the situation; though the pergola was so low that a festoon of ivy wreathed his straw hat, and the damp musty smell of ancient foliage pervaded his nostrils, ever afterwards he regarded that old ivy pergola as a bower of bliss; for where a man first kisses the woman he loves, that place is holy ground.

As Ned put his question, Martha stirred a little, but a strong arm held her tightly. ‘Tell me, dear,’ he said in her ear.

‘No, oh no’—in a low voice—‘but I was afraid you were angry with me. I told Sheila that I could not bear that.’

‘I am not sure that I was not angry’—for Ned’s love of truth was somewhat aggressive.

‘Oh, you must not be,’ in a piteous voice. ‘If I am hurting you, I am hurting myself too.’

‘If I could be certain of that,’ rather doubtfully. ‘Look here, Martha, there is no good covering up a sore place, unless a proper remedy is applied ; to tell you the truth, your refusal to engage yourself to me did hurt me more than a little.’

‘And yet you knew my reasons. Oh, Edward, how can you be so cruel?’ Martha had used his name unconsciously ; she had no idea what that low ‘Thank you’ meant.

‘No, I was not cruel, you must not call me that,’ Ned’s tone was still masterful ; ‘but a man likes to see the reason of a thing. Our opinions clashed, we looked at things from different points of view, that was all. If you had consented to be guided by me——’ But here Martha succeeded in freeing herself, and her voice was no longer tremulous.

‘Oh no, I dared not, it would not have been right. You must not tempt me ; I must stop with father, and you—you have your work.’

‘Yes, I know ; but I want my wife, Martha.’ Then, as the colour rushed into the girl’s face at that low, fond tone, and she raised her eyes to his, Martha looked almost beautiful. She could not speak, but that pained, loving expression went to his heart. ‘Why are you hurting me so when you love me?’ it seemed to say, and it checked the man’s impetuosity in a moment.

‘Dear, I will say no more ; you shall be free to do what you think right, and I will bide my time.’

‘And you are no longer angry with me?’

‘No,’ without a moment’s hesitation, ‘there shall be no such feeling between us. Whatever happens, I know you belong to me, and that in heart we shall never be divided ; I can trust you, my dear.’

‘Thank you—thank you for telling me this.’

‘Does it make you happier?’ with rather a melancholy smile ; ‘I am glad of that. My poor child, if you knew how I long to take your burdens on my shoulders ! But it must not be just yet.’

‘No, not yet.’

‘If you want me, if you change your mind, you have only to say “Come,” and I will be with you at any time.’

‘Oh, you are so good,’ she murmured.

‘You will not misunderstand me if I say that I shall not ask you to write to me. Sheila will tell me everything ; we shall be in constant correspondence—all you do will be known to me.’

‘And you will come down sometimes?’

‘Yes, for a few hours, or perhaps a night or two ; but,’ with a quick look at her, ‘I am not sure, perhaps it will be better not—better not.’ He frowned, hesitated, and then went on hurriedly, ‘Well, we will leave all that now, Martha ; we have said all that need be said, and Sheila will be expecting us.’ And then he motioned her to precede him down the green arcade.

Sheila and Nell had finished their tea, but Ruth had her orders, and a fresh brew was prepared. Nell made some excuse to leave them, but the trio were very silent. But Martha was no longer unhappy, the unbearable ache had gone. Ned no longer misunderstood her, and he was not angry ; and at the recollection of his tenderness, a sense of exquisite happiness seem to flood her being. What was a few

months' parting in comparison with the heart-joy of knowing herself to be so beloved ; she, Martha Woodford, with her plain, homely features and unattractive shyness. Ned was not specially humble, but he on his side would have marvelled if he had known how this girl venerated and well-nigh worshipped him.

Martha took her leave as soon as she had drunk her tea, and Ned walked with her to the gate. On his return he said just a word or two to Sheila. 'It is all right, She ; Martha and I understand each other.'

'Oh, I am so glad, Ned.'

'You were a brick to leave us together' ; and then Ned smiled in rather an inscrutable manner. 'It gave us an opportunity of clearing up things a bit' ; and then he betook himself to his study.

Ned was tolerably cheerful during the next few days, but he did not see Martha again until the evening before his departure for town, when he went to the Old Cottage to say good-bye.

Mr. Woodford seemed more low and despondent than usual, and Betty confided to him that she was sure her father would miss him dreadfully. 'You see you have spoilt him, Herr Professor,' she said reproachfully ; 'you were here nearly every evening, and he has got so used to you ; invalids are rather exacting, you know.'

'Oh, you must get Brett to look in oftener,' he returned hastily, but there was a trifle of uneasiness in his manner. He thought the old man looked more fragile and shrunken ; the heat of August had tried him, and he had not regained his lost strength. Ned remembered the vicar's speech, and his leave-taking was almost affectionate.

Very few words had passed between him and Martha. The girl sat apart at her work, and Ned rarely addressed her ; even when Betty had slipped out of the room on some pretext or other, he did not take advantage of the opportunity.

‘ Well, I must go,’ he said at last, and then he shook hands with the invalid. Martha laid aside her work and rose as he came towards her. ‘ Good-bye ’ was all she had breath to say.

‘ Good-bye—God bless you ! ’ he said hurriedly. His back was towards Mr. Woodford—the old man’s sight was somewhat feeble—Ned ventured to kiss the trembling hands one after another. ‘ Take care of yourself,’ was all he said, but Martha knew how to finish the sentence.

Ned was rather sorry to find Luke Brett sitting with Sheila on his return. He was in no mood for conversation ; but Luke soon discovered this for himself and did not remain long.

‘ Don’t trouble to walk back with me, Lassiter,’ he said pleasantly ; ‘ your sister will want you this evening.’

But Ned would not listen to this ; he must have his prowl, he said, or he would not sleep. Perhaps Luke’s society refreshed him, for after a time his taciturnity relaxed, and the two men were talking with their usual animation.

Sheila was persistently cheerful to the last. She helped Ned with his packing, drove with him to the station, and ignored his little speeches of sympathy.

‘ I do hope you won’t be dull, She.’

‘ Why, of course not, Ned ; I shall be far too busy. “ Tommy and Co. ” are rather a large order, you know, and I expect all my spare time will be taken up with letters to Heathcote Street.’

‘You will tell me everything ; you will not keep anything from me?’ rather anxiously.

‘My dear man, do I look like a designing and secretive female? Am I not the very incarnation of truth and frankness?’ Then, as the train came in sight, her manner changed. ‘You shall know everything—everything, Ned.’ Did Sheila guess what an impossible promise she was making? But she was really thinking of Martha.

‘Keep a good heart, dear, and take care of yourself, that is all I ask of you’; and then they pressed each other’s hands.

Sheila had been very brave, but her heart sank a little as she drove back to The Moorings. How empty the house would be without Ned ; how dull and uninteresting the meals without Herr Professor’s monologues and good-natured chaff ; how she would miss the familiar scent of tobacco when she passed the study door ! Ned had begged Sheila to use the room whenever she liked, but he hinted that ‘Tommy and Co.’ were to be excluded. ‘Brett may come whenever he likes,’ he had said, ‘but I can’t have Ivor lounging in and out’; and Sheila had promised, with many a yea and nay, to guard Ned’s cherished sanctum. ‘I shall dust all your books and papers myself,’ she had assured him, ‘and no Philistine, either big or little, shall cross the threshold’; and Ned knew that she would keep her word.

Ivor was at the gate watching for her ; he and Nell were both very kind and attentive.

‘That funny little lady Miss Lorimer has been here, Sheila,’ observed Nell. ‘She gave me a message for you. She wants you to have tea with her to-morrow. I was to tell you that she would take no

refusal, and that if you did not turn up by four, she should send the vicar to fetch you. She was as droll as possible about it, but I think she really wants you.'

'Then I must go,' returned Sheila smiling. 'I will ask Betty to come over for an hour or two, she does so love to play with the children.'

'Dear Miss Gillian,' she said to herself, as she went upstairs, 'it is just like her kind heart. She knows how dull I shall be missing my poor old Ned, and she wants to cheer me up.' And then, as the study door was open, she went in for a moment. The paper that Ned had been reading lay on the floor, as usual. She picked it up and folded it neatly. Then she went through the room, putting things straight, restoring books to the shelves, after an orderly feminine fashion. 'One day Martha will do this,' she thought, 'and then she will find out how untidy he is'—this last remark elicited by the fact that Ned's old slippers and a boot-jack were reposing snugly in his waste-paper basket.

It was a melancholy evening, but Miss Gillian's invitation was the one streak of sunshine. Sheila would not have owned to herself for worlds how the pleasant prospect lightened her despondency; self-deception is under some circumstances a blessing.

Betty was always ready to accept an invitation to The Moorings. From the first she and Ivor had been good friends, and she was very kind to Nell. She taught her to play croquet, and was very patient with her awkwardness and blunders; and she would not allow Ivor to find fault with her. Nell, whose ball rarely passed through a hoop, and who was at the mercy of every adversary, toiled on with much enjoyment, and a sort of dogged perseverance that appealed to Betty's feelings.

‘I have enjoyed it awfully,’ Nell would protest ; ‘only I am that tired that I could drop with fatigue. If I could only play like you and Ivor.’

‘Oh, you are only a beginner,’ Betty would say cheerfully. She was beginning to like Nell. She was a little slow and dense, but so gentle and willing, so grateful for a kind word, so devoted to her husband and children.

Sheila spent a happy afternoon with her friend in the pleasant vicarage garden. Luke joined them at tea, and stayed on chatting with them until it was time for her to return home, and then he at once suggested that he and Peter should accompany her. This had become a usual habit with him, and Sheila took it as a matter of course. It was just a proof of their agreeable intimacy that Sheila never made any demur to this. Now and then she would wonder whether Luke Brett found her society so congenial that he was unwilling to relinquish it ; but her innate modesty forbade her following out the thought. It was sufficient for her to know that he was no longer reserved with her ; that he would speak freely to her of all that interested him, as though he were sure of her sympathy ; and the knowledge that this was so was very sweet to Sheila.

CHAPTER XXIX

NED MAKES NEW FRIENDS

Work is the best birthright which man still retains. It is the strongest of moral tonics, the most vigorous of mental medicines.—ANON.

May God make us patient to live! Not that we should not have aspirations; but till the flying comes, let us brood contentedly upon our nests.—ANON.

As the vicarage gate closed behind them, Mr. Brett said quietly, 'So Aunt Gill has done you good. I am glad of that.' But he might have added truthfully that it was not Miss Gillian who had suggested Sheila's visit; she had only acted on her nephew's hint.

'Though why I trouble to do it,' she said to herself, with a little petulant fling of her cap-strings, 'when he never gets forrarder, the tiresome fellow, passes my comprehension. But there, Luke was always an enigma'; and Miss Gillian shrugged her shapely shoulders.

It is the one who looks on who is the best judge of the game, and this shrewd little person had long ago made up her mind that Luke was by no means indifferent to Sheila Lassiter.

'It is not what he says,' she observed to herself, 'for he seldom mentions her name; but it is the way he looks at her sometimes, as though she somehow

rested and satisfied him. Oh, my lad, you can't deceive me'; and here Miss Gillian's heart heaved a little under the lace fichu; for when a woman has once clearly read the lovelight in a man's eyes, she is quick to discern it, though the glow is not for her.

When Luke made his little remark, Sheila gave him one of her bright frank smiles.

'Dear Miss Gillian, hers is such a sunshiny nature. But you have done me good too—you always do.'

'That is good hearing,' he returned heartily; 'but of course we both knew how you would miss your brother. But you were right to let him go; the change will do him a world of good.'

'Do you think so?' rather doubtfully. 'Ned does so love the country; and Heathcote Street is so dull.'

'Oh, he will be too busy to heed that. In my opinion, Miss Lassiter, your brother is a man of undoubted intellect, and the world will find it out some day. But he has never had a chance to distinguish himself; he wants to rub up against other folk and pick their brains. The world of books is all very well, but we want the school of life too. I have been able to give him one or two introductions that are likely to be of service to him.'

'Oh yes, I know,' returned Sheila gratefully. 'Ned was so pleased; he says Professor Lockhart is a name to conjure with.'

'He is one of the leaders of thought for this generation, and he is also a capital fellow,' observed Luke. 'He keeps open house for his friends on Thursday evenings, and his wife is charming. They are great friends of mine; if I want to spend a few days in town, I always stay with the Lockharts.'

‘Do they ever come to Uplands?’

‘Yes, generally once a year; but this summer Mrs. Lockhart lost her mother, and they went to Scotland instead. Dora Lockhart—I have known her from a child—is devoted to my aunt.’

‘Oh, I am so glad that Ned is to make the acquaintance of such pleasant people.’

‘Lockhart is an influential man,’ went on Luke, ‘and he knows a good many distinguished people—I mean distinguished in science or literature. At No. 12 Queensborough Terrace brain-picking can be carried on with considerable profit.’

Sheila was conscious of a perceptible lightening of heart. Mr. Brett was presenting things under a new aspect. Hitherto she had thought of Ned going into a dingy exile to live the life of a bookworm, and to oscillate between the British Museum and his lodgings in Heathcote Street; his hours of work only diversified by solitary prowls under gas-lamps, when he would traverse miles of pavement, thinking of his lady-love and feeling homesick and miserable.

But Luke Brett’s thoughtfulness had changed all this. The introduction to Professor Lockhart would be the open sesame to a brilliant circle of master minds. For the first time in his life Ned would know the pleasure of intercourse with men who had thought deeply. If Mr. Brett were right, Ned was not to be pitied.

She roused from this pleasant reverie as he again broke the silence.

‘He will get on all right after a time,’ he was saying; ‘Lassiter has plenty of pluck and go in him. Now there is a word I have to say before you go in,’ for they had reached Sandy Lane by this time,—‘I

want you to promise that if you are in any difficulty, or in need of any advice or help in your brother's absence, you will not forget your friends at the vicarage. I shall esteem it a privilege as well as a pleasure to help you in any way.'

'Thank you very much,' she returned in a low voice.

'Then you promise?' with a quick glance at her.

'Yes, if you are sure that I shall not trouble you. You see,' she continued frankly, 'Ivor is younger, and I have never been able to ask him things, and I cannot begin now.'

'That is what I meant. Well, I shall hold you to your compact. If any little difficulty occur, you will send for me. Now I will wish you good evening'; and then he shook hands and left her.

Sheila felt strangely comforted; the heavy weight of depression seemed lifted. That very evening she wrote a bright letter to Ned, the first of her 'cheerful series' as she called them. Earlier in the day she had paid a visit to the Old Cottage and had found Martha looking better and more like herself. Sheila guessed that, sorely as she missed Ned, his absence had removed a certain strain. Though she was a little heavy-eyed and subdued, she talked with some attempt at cheerfulness; but as Mr. Woodford and Betty were both in the room, there could be no confidential conversation between them.

The days passed on, and then the weeks, and though Sheila could never reconcile herself to Ned's absence, and she secretly missed him every hour of the day, she was not in the least unhappy. After the first week or so Ned's letters gave her nothing but satisfaction. She used to read portions to Martha, thereby

earning her endless gratitude. Martha used to look wistfully at the closely-written pages. If only he would have written a line to her now and then, for her to treasure and gloat over! But she had to content herself with a brief message.

Ned had fought bravely with home-sickness and restlessness, and had settled to work in earnest. He was reading hard and taking notes.

By and by his letters became more interesting. His visits to the Lockharts were mentioned, and descriptions of the interesting people he met there now were sent for Sheila's delectation.

Ned was evidently anxious that his faithful chum and house-mate should share his pleasure. 'I wish you knew the Lockharts, She,' he wrote once; 'but I dare-say you will one day, for they generally spend a week or two at the vicarage in the summer. Mrs. Lockhart is a charming little person, and so kind and friendly. I went with them to a concert at St. James's Hall one evening, and I am to go to the Albert Hall with them next week. People are awfully friendly, and I have generally some invitation on hand; but I limit myself to an occasional concert or theatre and the Thursday socials at Queensborough Terrace.

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," and what is good for Jack is good for Ned. I hope you see the logic of that, my dear. I think I work all the better for mixing with my fellow-creatures. My word, She, when I think of that dingy house in Brook Street, and that old dress-coat of mine, and how you nearly wept over it, I am inclined to think we have moved on a bit.' And then with a few affectionate words the letter ended; but the postscript was the best part to Martha.

‘Your letter was too short, She ; you wrote in a hurry. You must tell me more about the Old Cottage and my dear one.’

‘He writes happily, does he not?’ observed Sheila, as she replaced the letter in the envelope. ‘What a blessing it is to me that Ned is such a good correspondent. This letter is more interesting than usual—perhaps you would like to read it for yourself ; you can give it me back to-morrow.’ Perhaps Sheila had detected Martha’s longing glance ; but not even she guessed how often the girl re-read that postscript—‘You must tell me more about the Old Cottage and my dear one.’ Martha walked in a blissful dream all the rest of the day.

As far as Ned was concerned, Sheila was fully satisfied, and she was quite ready to endorse Luke Brett’s opinion, that this prolonged stay in town would be of the greatest benefit to him. And with her usual unselfishness she rejoiced in his evident absorption in work, and the pleasure he derived from the society of his new friends.

Not for worlds would she have reminded him of his promise to run down for a week-end ; and though she wondered a little when the closing days of November came and Ned made no sign, she never dropped a hint of her own longing to see him, except once to Mr. Brett.

‘Ned has been away two months now,’ she said once when he had overtaken her in the village, and they had walked on to the vicarage together ; ‘I fancied he would have run down to see us before now, but I expect he is too busy.’

‘It is not always easy to break off work,’ returned Luke, ‘and probably he is afraid of unsettling himself.’ And Sheila felt he was right.

‘But he will come at Christmas,’ she continued cheerfully, ‘I must try and be patient until then.’

‘I think you are always patient,’ observed Luke, and one of his rare vivid smiles lit up his dark face; and then he turned in at the schools and Sheila went on her way.

Ned knew from Sheila’s letters that all was going on well at The Moorings. Ivor was gaining strength daily, and Tommy was growing quite robust, and Nell was a different creature. Sheila told Ned that Ivor was beginning to feel the need of employment, and that he talked of looking out for a berth as soon as possible. ‘He has made acquaintance with a young man in the village,’ she wrote. ‘I think you know the name—Robert Crowe—he is a house-agent and land-surveyor, and does rather a good business. He is not a gentleman, of course, but he is an honest man, and Mrs. Crowe is really a nice little woman. I meet her at the district meetings at the vicarage. Ivor has taken rather a fancy to them both. I don’t know how he came across them, but Robert Crowe has suggested that he should come into the office for a few months and get a notion of the business. Ivor is going to write to you himself about it, for he says he is ashamed of living on you in this fashion, and it is about time to turn his hand to something. Let us know your opinion, Ned, as soon as possible.’

Ned’s answer came by return post.

‘You had better consult Brett,’ he wrote; ‘he is a good all-round man, and he knows Crowe better than I do. But, as far as I can judge, it is not a bad plan. In my opinion, any occupation will be better than idleness for Ivor, and if Dr. Moorhouse thinks he is strong enough for work, he might try in another month

or so ; but of course the doctor must decide this. All knowledge is useful, and though house-agency and land-surveying are not in my line, I daresay Ivor may turn them to account. Anyhow, it won't be waste of time. You see, my dear Sheila, that Ivor has led such a wandering, desultory life that it will not be easy to find a good berth for him. An accountant in a colonial store is not so much to boast about ; so, if Dr. Moorhouse and the vicar agree, I should advise him to try it. He will get a better thing later on if a respectable firm like Crowe and Son will speak for him.'

Ned's opinion clinched the matter, and as Dr. Moorhouse thought Ivor's health considerably improved, and Luke Brett told Sheila that though Robert Crowe was a rough diamond, he was certainly an honest man and much respected in the place, it was decided that Ivor should start work at the beginning of the new year. There could be no talk of any salary. Ivor had to learn the business. As Ned had said, anything was better than idleness, and Ivor was already showing signs that renewed health was bringing restlessness. He was manly enough to feel his dependence on his brother both irksome and galling, and Luke Brett very wisely fostered this feeling.

'Busy people have no time to be dull,' Sheila had remarked once in a letter to Ned, in answer to a somewhat anxious inquiry after her mental welfare ; 'and I am simply occupied from morning to night. My household duties, "Tommy and Co.," and latterly my district, give me constant employment. I miss my little helper, Betty. The Allens have got hold of her again, and we do not expect her back much before

Christmas. Of course I see Martha every day, but my visits are short ones. It is impossible for her to leave her father. He is certainly more feeble, and I am quite sure that you will find a change in him. Martha never speaks to me about it, but I can see that she is anxious. I hinted yesterday that Betty ought not to stay away so long; but you know how unselfish Martha is, she only said that she was glad that the child was enjoying herself, and that she was not at all tired. But it is no use speaking to her, Martha never will think of herself.'

It was Sheila's habit to go over to the Old Cottage in the gloaming, and sit for an hour with the invalid. Mr. Woodford always brightened up when he saw her. He liked her to read to him any interesting descriptions out of Ned's letters. It was evident that the old man still missed him.

Ivor accompanied her sometimes. He would willingly have played chess with him, but Mr. Woodford was too weak for his favourite amusement, and even Ivor's talk wearied him. He still loved Martha to read to him, though his attention often wandered, and at times he would become drowsy and doze. Sheila seldom saw Martha alone; even if Martha followed her out into the hall for a few parting words, her father's voice would recall her for some imaginary want or other. He was too gentle to be querulous, but his demands on his daughter's time and patience grew more constant each day.

Sheila did not dare tell Ned how thin and pale Martha looked—it would only have worried and unsettled him—though she faithfully carried out her promise of telling him all that passed at the Cottage. Christmas must soon come, and then Betty would

return. And Ned would spend a week at The Moorings—seven whole days and nights—and then he would see things for himself.

How Sheila looked forward to Christmas! Her preparations made her busier than ever, and Ivor found a good deal of amusement in helping her. There was to be a Christmas tree for the children, and Martha's skilful fingers were employed in dressing dolls and working tasteful little gifts for the elder members of the family. The embroidered tobacco pouch for Ned's use gave Martha hours of secret pleasure, and so did the satin mouchoir-case for Sheila.

Ivor found plenty of scope for his energies in helping Sheila and Nell adorn the hall and dining-room with holly and evergreens. The 'Welcome' over Ned's study was quite a work of art designed by Ivor. Nor were his labours confined to The Moorings.

Mr. Brett, who was short of workers, had begged both him and Sheila to assist in the church decorations, and neither of them had liked to refuse.

Ned had arranged to come down by an evening train on Christmas Eve, and the greater part of the day they were hard at work in the church. Sheila had snatched a hasty tea at the vicarage, and had returned to her task of finishing the pulpit, when the vicar interposed.

'Do you know how late it is?' he asked. 'It is nearly six, and you are expecting your brother in another hour. You can leave that for me to finish. I daresay Lassiter will stay and help me. You won't mind walking home by yourself?'

'I—oh, of course not. What an idea! Oh, must I really go?' looking rather regretfully at her work. 'There is only just that festoon to put up, and——'

‘It shall be done,’ he returned quietly ; ‘you need not fear that either your brother or I will spoil your beautiful work. I know exactly where the festoon is to go.’

‘But you are so tired, Mr. Brett,’—for Luke looked paler than usual, and a little pinched, as though the cold tried him—‘and you have worked so hard.’

‘Not harder than you have. Come, I am waiting to take your place. Lassiter is just finishing his tea, and then he will join me. ‘You will be here at the early service?’

‘Oh yes, we shall all be there. Isn’t it wonderful, Mr. Brett, to think that Ivor will be with us this year?’ Then he stretched out his hand to her with a smile of quiet sympathy.

‘May it be a happy and blessed Christmas to you and yours!’ he said in a low voice; and he walked with her to the church door.

‘It is very dark,’ he observed uneasily. ‘After all, I think your brother had better go with you.’ But Sheila only laughed at this.

‘What does it matter?’ she said brightly ; ‘I know every step of the way ; I shall be home in ten minutes.’ But he stood in the lighted doorway watching her until the gray cloak disappeared in the distance.

As Sheila passed through the lich-gate the darkness seemed to swallow her up.

‘I ought to have brought my lantern,’ she said to herself ; ‘I shall have to be careful I do not stumble into a ditch. It will be lighter when I get to the main road.’ But the next moment she recoiled somewhat startled, as something tall and black seemed to rise out of the ground before her.

‘Is it you, She? I hope I am not addressing a

stranger, but in this pitchy darkness——' But Sheila's hand was on his arm.

'Ned, oh Ned !' was all she could say. But it was quite enough for Ned ; he gave a satisfied grunt and tucked her hand under his arm, and they walked on happily together.

CHAPTER XXX

THE CHRISTMAS MESSAGE

He leadeth me !
I shall not take one needless step through all,
In wind, or heat, or cold ;
And all day long He sees the peaceful end
Through trials manifold ;
Up the fair hillside, like a sweet surprise,
Waiteth the quiet Fold.

MARY K. A. STORER.

NOW, explain yourself, Ned. What does this mean ? Why have you arrived an hour before your time ? Have you been to The Moorings ? Has Nell sent you on ?' Sheila put her questions a little breathlessly as they trudged on in the dark and cold. It was music in her ears to hear Ned's dry little laugh in reply.

'I found I could take an earlier train, so I thought I would steal a march on you. No, I have not been home. There was no fly at the station—they were all engaged—so I left my portmanteau to be sent on, and walked up, and just as I was crossing the Church Green I came upon Miss Betty. She was going to the vicarage, and she told me that you were in the church with Brett.'

'Oh, I wish you had come in, Ned, and then I

could have seen you.' And again Ned laughed—there was something so fervent in Sheila's tone.

'We shall soon be home,' he returned placidly. 'It is a bit cloudy to-night, but the stationmaster thinks we shall have frost before morning. The air is certainly keener.'

'You have come for a whole week, Ned?'

'Well, yes, I think so. I have been working hard, and have earned a holiday.'

And then, as the lights of the Old Cottage came in view, Ned became a little silent. But as they crossed the lane he said rather abruptly—

'I knew Martha was not in the church.'

'No, she could not leave Mr. Woodford,' returned Sheila; 'he is very feeble and ailing, though he still comes downstairs for the greater part of the day. She has not been to see us for weeks; he is always so low and restless in her absence.'

Ned made no response to this, and then the door was opened and they found themselves in the warm lighted hall, with Nell smiling at them from the threshold of the drawing-room.

'Oh, I am so glad to see you, Mr. Edward,' she said.

And then Tommy rushed at him with a delighted shout. Bunnie greeted him more soberly. The lights, the greenery, and the bright welcoming faces almost dazed Ned coming out of the darkness.

'My word, you all look festive to-night,' he observed. And then Eppie came out of her kitchen to greet the master.

'Eh, but it has been a watery Sabbath without you, Mr. Edward,' she said, as he shook hands with her. 'The place hasn't been like itself, has it, Miss Sheila?'

And then relapsing into the old mother-tongue—‘Losh preserve us a’, I’s e warrant the master has grown. Hoots aye, but it’s michty to see him so weel and bonnie.’

Sheila followed him upstairs. Ned looked a little touched as he saw the ‘Welcome’ over the door of his sanctum. A bright fire was burning in the study, and the easy-chair looked delightfully inviting, with the little table and reading-lamp beside it.

‘It is jolly to be home again, She.’ And then Sheila put her arms quietly round his neck and kissed him.

‘Dear old Ned, if you knew how happy I am to see your face again!’ Then she knelt down on the rug and made a pretence of touching up the fire.

Ned sat down in his easy-chair and stretched his hands comfortably to the blaze. He was quite aware that there were tears in Sheila’s eyes. As he watched her thoughtfully, he was telling himself that she had grown younger and prettier in his absence.

‘There is nothing like home,’ he observed presently. ‘At first I missed you and The Moorings and everything awfully, but I would not give in. I just stuck to my work like grim death, and after a time I felt more cheerful. I don’t repent these three months, She.’

‘I daresay not.’

‘No indeed. Queensborough Terrace is a new world for me. I have reason to be grateful to Brett for his introduction. I am getting quite intimate with the Lockharts. I often have supper with them on Sundays. It is my only chance of seeing them alone, for there are always lots of people there on Thursdays. On the whole, I may say that I am having a good time, She ;

and if only you do not miss me too much, I shall be quite content to go back for another three months, or even longer.'

'Dear Ned, I shall be quite satisfied if you are only well and happy.'

'Oh, as to that, happiness is a relative term'—and here he moved restlessly. 'I cannot pretend to be satisfied with my existence under present conditions, but I am quite sure that I am happier in London. But all the same, I mean to enjoy my holiday.' And after this they had one of their old talks.

'Our first Christmas at The Moorings,' thought Sheila, as she woke the next morning.

And then as the quartette sallied out into the winter's darkness, Ivor carrying a lantern to guide them, another glimmering light shone across Sleepy Hollow, as the two sisters came out of the gate of the Old Cottage.

'Do not walk so fast, Bee,' whispered Martha in an agitated voice; 'I would much rather follow them.'

But Ned, who was on the watch, saw the gleam of the lantern in Betty's hand, and deliberately waited for them.

'It is quite early, She,' he observed; 'but the others can go on.' And then in the Christmas darkness, with the stars still shining overhead, Martha's trembling hand was taken and kept.

There was no spoken word of greeting. Betty had moved to Sheila's side, and the little cavalcade went on silently. It was only at the lich-gate that Ned relinquished his hold. How comforting that firm strong clasp had been to Martha. Then, as they entered the church, Ned drew back for them to precede him.

But, whether by intent or accident, he was kneeling beside her when they partook of the Christmas feast ; and as they left the church in the faint gray dawn Ned was waiting for her in the porch, and again they found themselves alone.

Martha looked up at him a little shyly.

‘I have not wished you a happy Christmas,’ she said gently.

‘Let me wish it you too.’ And then he added rather abruptly, ‘Martha, you look very tired. Is it wise of you to come out in the cold?’

‘Oh, I am so used to it,’ she returned ; ‘Betty and I are never afraid of any weather ; and I could not have absented myself from the Christmas service ; and it was so nice to be with you all.’ But she whispered the last words.

‘Thank you, dear.’ But Ned said nothing more. It pained him to see how weary and worn the girl looked. Sheila was right, and she was certainly thinner. Close confinement, and very often wakeful nights, with the constant strain of anxiety, was telling upon her.

Ned’s kind look and silent sympathy opened Martha’s lips.

‘My father is worse,’ she said sadly. ‘Dr. Moorhouse says there is no immediate danger, but he cannot deny that there is cause for anxiety ; he suffers so much with his head, and then he is so restless ; and there are times when he gets a little confused.’

‘It is too much for you’—in a sympathising tone. ‘All this anxiety is wearing you out.’

‘Oh no, I am very strong. But it breaks my heart to see him so unhappy. He is always saying that his life is a failure, and that he has so little to leave us.

He cannot bear the thought that Betty and I will have to work.'

'Oh, I think I can comfort him there.' But Martha hurried on as though she had not heard this. Oh, the relief of pouring her troubles into those beloved ears!

'Now and then, when he is very weak, he has an idea that my mother and the boys are in the room. Betty is always so upset when she hears him talking to them; but Dr. Moorhouse says it is only brain exhaustion, and that we must not take any notice. Often, when I go to him in the night, he calls me by my mother's name. "Barbara, why have you got out of your warm bed?" he will say sometimes.

'My dear, if I could only save you this—if you had a nurse——' But she shook her head.

'Oh no, there is no need. Jane is so good and helpful; and he gives so little trouble. I love to do things for him, and so does Betty.'

'Well, we shall see how he goes on. I will come round after luncheon, but I shall not be able to stay; the children are to have their Christmas-tree as soon as it gets dark, and then we are to dine at six that Tommy may see the plum-pudding on fire. He has talked of nothing else for days.'

'Yes, I know; and Betty has been specially invited for the afternoon. I will tell father that you are coming—he will be so pleased.' And then, as Betty was waiting for her, Martha hurried away.

Ned was greatly shocked at the change in his old friend's appearance. He looked shrunken to half his size, and even his voice was weak; but he cheered up at the sight of his favourite. After a little talk, Martha was called away and the old man waxed confidential.

'What that girl is to me, Lassiter,' he said in a

broken voice, 'only God knows. She is the best and dearest of daughters.'

'I can well believe it.'

'She has been a blessing to us ever since she was born. And I am wearing her out. Oh, she will never own it, but all the same it is the truth. When I wake in the night she is always beside me, and sometimes I think it is her mother. Lassiter, it breaks my heart to think my girls will have to work after I am gone. But there will be next to nothing. By and by my little Betty will marry, but not for a long time. But my poor Martha——'

'My dear old friend, I can set your mind at rest there,' and Ned's face was flushed and earnest. 'Martha will be my care. There is no reason why I should not tell you. We love each other, and one day I hope to make her my wife.'

'Good heavens, is this really true?' Mr. Woodford spoke with unusual agitation. 'You love my Martha?'

'Have I surprised you, sir?'

'Yes, it is a great surprise. To be sure, once or twice I thought the child was not happy, and I wondered if she missed you. But I never could be certain that it was not my fancy. My dear fellow, if this be really true, you are taking a heavy burden off a sick man, and I shall no longer fear to die.' But with a sudden change of tone, 'You will not take her from me until——until——' but his voice dropped into silence as Martha entered the room.

But Ned's 'No, no; you may trust me,' was sufficient answer.

Martha looked at them both a little anxiously. 'Father dear, you have been talking too much,' she said tenderly, and laying her cheek against the gray

head. 'You must let Mr. Lassiter go now, for they are lighting up the tree, and Sheila wants him.'

'Yes, he shall go; but wait one moment, both of you. Martha, why have you not told me? It would have made me so happy, darling, to know that this dear fellow will care for you when I am gone.'

'Oh, Edward, what have you done?' Martha's voice was a little reproachful, but Ned merely smiled at her.

'Why should you grudge him the comfort of knowing that some one is ready and willing to work for you? Martha, you must not always have your own way, it is not good for you. Mr. Woodford is on my side.' And then he took her hand and kissed it. But Martha had no answer ready.

When Ned had left the room she hid her glowing face on her father's knee, while the feeble hand smoothed her hair.

'Martha, my dear child, God is very good to me; he has taken away the bitterness of death. I shall not be afraid of leaving my children now. He is a good man—Brett has said so more than once. You will be safe in his hands.'

'Yes, yes; but do not talk any more, dear father,' pressing him in her arms. 'I want you to live as long as you can. I cannot part with you even for him.' Then the old man smiled a little sadly.

The parting must come soon, he knew that; but at least he could thank God that death had lost its sting, that the thorns had been removed from his dying pillow. He would never see another Christmas, he was sure of that. But in that other world Barbara and the boys and his little Rosie would be waiting for him, so how could he grieve to go?

'Barbara used to say that even there she would not

be happy without me,' he murmured. And then with a trembling hand he pulled out his handkerchief and dried Martha's eyes as though she were a child.

'Do not cry, my dear. I shall not go until the Master calls me, and you will have the love of a good man to comfort you.'

But as Martha sat there in the firelight, with her head still resting against his knee, as he dozed in the gloaming, her thoughts wandered from Ned to the dear old days of long ago. She was back at the Grange again. She could smell the roses on the terrace, and see the white fantail pigeons strutting across the lawn. There was the hall and the gallery, and the striped tiger-skin before the empty fireplace; and in the great window-seat in the drawing-room, a fair-haired woman bending over an embroidery frame. Then came childish footsteps and eager voices. How distinctly she could see the three faces—Drummond and Willie and her pet Rosie. Well might the bereaved parents have inscribed those touching words on the headstone that marked the grave of their darlings :

And with the morn those angel faces smile,
Which I have loved long since and lost awhile.

It was all so vivid and sweet, that Martha could never be sure if she were asleep or waking. Probably the warmth and stillness lulled her into a half-waking doze, for it seemed to her as though her mother was beside her; she could feel her hand on her shoulder.

'He is a good man, Martha. You will be his blessing as you have been ours. Come, Reginald.'

The dream was so vivid, the voice so distinct, that Martha woke with a little shiver. Reginald—that

was her father's name, how strange to hear it again ! What a sweet Christmas dream ! How dark it was ! The fire had burnt low, and her father was still sleeping. She touched the smouldering log, and a sudden flame illuminated the room ; and at that moment the door opened, and Betty, laden with parcels, stood on the threshold, flushed and radiant. But Martha's low ' Hush ' silenced her.

' Do not wake him, Bee ; he is sleeping so soundly.' And Martha, cramped and still a little confused from her dreams, rose somewhat stiffly to her feet. But the next moment there was a terrified exclamation. ' Betty—for heaven's sake—bring a light—he has fainted—father has fainted ! '

The floor was strewn with Christmas gifts, and Betty, startled and alarmed, carried in the lamp with shaking hands, followed by the old servant. They found Martha on her knees chafing the cold hands. ' Bring brandy, quick ! Take away that pillow, Jane.' But the woman shook her head as she obeyed.

' It is no use, Miss Martha, my dear,' she said, as the girl tried one remedy after another. ' The master, bless him, will never open his eyes in this world again. He is in a better place, my lamb, where the weary are at rest.'

The old servant was right. In the stillness of the Christmas gloaming the call had come to Reginald Woodford, and the angel of death had whispered his message of peace into a sleeping man's ear. But for a long time Martha refused to believe it.

' Send for Dr. Moorhouse ; ask some one to go.' And Betty, white and shaking, ran across to The Moorings.

When Ruth admitted her, the poor little thing

brushed past her, and almost stumbled into the dining-room, where they were all gathered round the festive board. The lights seemed to dance before Betty's eyes ; she felt sick and giddy.

'Oh, come—my father!' was all she could say ; and then Sheila and Ned were beside her.

'You poor child, what is it?' Sheila's comforting arm was round her. 'Has Martha sent for us?' Then Betty tried hard to swallow the lump in her throat.'

'Yes, he has fainted ; but Jane says he is dead, and Martha wants Dr. Moorhouse, please.'

'I will go.' Ned's voice, strong and helpful, broke in here. 'Go across with her, Sheila ; I will be with you directly. Ivor, try to help them.' And the next minute Ned's long legs were striding through the darkness, while Sheila and Betty hurried across to the Cottage.

Martha was still in the same position ; she was holding the lifeless hands to her breast. 'I think they are a little warmer,' she said, with a pitiful smile, as Sheila stood beside her. The poor girl was still dazed from her long sleep ; she seemed incapable of realising what had happened.

She took no heed when Sheila begged her to rise, when she gently told her that there was nothing more to be done.

'Has some one gone for 'Dr. Moorhouse?' was all she asked.

'Yes, dear, Ned has gone ; they will soon be here.'

'I knew he would go—he is so kind—he is always so ready to help.' And then she fondled the hands, and laid her cheek against them. 'You like *him* so much, father, do you not ?'

‘Oh, Sheila, I cannot bear it,’ cried Betty ; ‘it is so dreadful to hear her. Oh, Marty, do wake up, and be yourself. Darling father cannot hear you—he has left us and gone to mother.’ And then the poor child became hysterical, and burst into sobs and tears.

CHAPTER XXXI

‘SUCH A PEACEFUL DEATH’

‘The loved and lost!’ Why do we call them lost?
Because we miss them from our onward road?
God’s unseen angel o’er our pathway crossed,
Looked on us all, and loving them the most,
Straightway relieved them from life’s weary load.

ANON.

THE time seemed long to Sheila before the rush of cold air and the sound of footsteps announced the doctor’s arrival. At the sight of the kind familiar face Martha grew more calm and collected. She moved aside of her own accord, and let him take her place.

‘I know you will do what you can for him,’ she said in a voice that made Ned’s heart ache. As he put his arm round her, she looked up in his face with a flickering smile.

‘You were so good to bring him. It has been such a long faint, and I was so frightened. But Dr. Moorhouse is so clever. I must do what I can to help him.’ But Ned, who had just seen the doctor lay down the limp hand, held her fast.

‘You can do nothing, my dearest.’ And then Dr. Moorhouse, who had given a few hasty directions to Jane, came up to them.

‘My dear child,’ he said kindly, ‘God has taken

your poor father in his sleep. It is heart failure, but he has not suffered. Now, we are going to carry him to his room, but I want you to stay down here with Miss Lassiter.' And then, as they bore the lifeless remains from the room, Martha's dormant faculties slowly awoke.

'He is dead—he died in his sleep—Dr. Moorhouse said so.' She spoke like a child who had just mastered a difficult lesson.

'Such a peaceful death, dear,' whispered Sheila. 'No pain, no consciousness, no fear,—he just slept away like a worn-out child.' For she as well as Ned had been awed by the solemn sweetness of the dead man's smile.

'Yes, I know, and she came for him. Do you hear me, Bee?' addressing her weeping sister. 'Darling mother was with the angel. Do you know what she said? "Come, Reginald," and then they took him.'

'Oh, Sheila, has the shock turned her brain?' and Betty looked scared to death. 'I never, never heard her talk like this before.'

'No, dear, she is only dazed. You must remember what nights she has had lately—only snatches of sleep; and it was all so sudden, you see.' But though Sheila said this, she felt vaguely uncomfortable. But Martha only smiled a little strangely. She was too weary to reason with them, and indeed, even when she grew calmer and more capable of reflection, she could never make up her mind whether it had been a dream or a waking vision.

'Voices are seldom distinct in dreams,' she said long afterwards to Ned. 'I shall always feel that my mother was near us that night.'

Ned did not try to combat this idea. He was very

gentle with her, and kept his thoughts to himself. 'Perhaps it may have been so, dearest,' was all he said to her.

'After all, "there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in our philosophy,"' he remarked later on to Luke Brett, when they were talking on this subject. 'I have never been disposed to believe in such things myself. Martha was overwrought; in my opinion, it was only a singularly vivid dream.'

'One cannot tell,' returned Luke thoughtfully. 'The spiritual world may be nearer than we imagine; only our senses are so gross and clogged with earthliness. "Their old men shall dream dreams, and their young men shall see visions." And perhaps to the pure in heart, the children of the kingdom, heavenly presences may become visible. I have myself dreamed——'

But here, to Ned's regret, Luke paused, and the firm lips closed. No, such things were too sacred—he would not speak of them.

A little later Sheila slipped away to intercept Dr. Moorhouse. He promised to send Martha a composing-draught, and begged that she should go to her room at once. Sheila found that 'Jane had thoughtfully lighted fires in both the girls' rooms. She discovered afterwards that this was always their Christmas treat. The little rooms looked very snug and warm. Sheila found Ned in the sitting-room when she returned. He was kneeling beside Martha's chair, so that she could rest her heavy head against his shoulder. Betty was on the rug at her sister's feet. No one was speaking.

Martha consented to do as Dr. Moorhouse wished; but she stipulated that she should see her father first.

'Dear Martha, not to-night,' pleaded Ned. But

she persisted, and they were obliged to let her have her way.

'I must say good-night to him,' she whispered; 'I always do, you know.' And then she and Sheila went upstairs. Betty followed them, but she shrank from entering the chamber of death.

Martha was very quiet, and did not give way. 'I should have liked to say my prayers here,' she said, 'only it is so cold, and I am too tired.' Then she stooped and kissed the chill forehead—it felt like marble. 'Good-night, my darling,' she whispered. And as Sheila helped her to undress, she said in a dreamy tone—'Oh, how much he and mother will have to say to each other!' And it was evident that her thoughts were brooding with solemn joy on that reunion in paradise.

Martha would have refused the composing-draught, but Sheila persuaded her to take it.

'I do not need it; I shall sleep soundly without it.' And indeed she was so worn out that she was asleep before Sheila left the room.

Sheila stayed with Betty a little, and then left her in Jane's charge and went downstairs. To her surprise Ned was still waiting for her.

'I sent Ivor home an hour ago,' he observed. 'It is very late—half-past eleven—and you look so tired, She; but one can hardly wonder at that. I think I was half asleep myself.'

'I am sorry I have been so long, but Betty wanted me to stay with her. She was too nervous to be left, but Jane means to sleep in her room. Martha is resting so sweetly.' And then, as Ned opened the door, Sheila saw it was snowing, and that the ground was already white.

Eppie had, as usual, cared for their comfort. The fire burnt brightly in Ned's study, the coffee-pot was on the fender, and a tray of food on the little round table ; for they had left their dinner half-eaten.

Ned put Sheila in the easy-chair and waited on her ; then he poured out some coffee for himself.

'Our first Christmas at The Moorings has been a strange one, She,' he said, with a sigh.

'Yes, but we have had our Christmas feast together,' she returned in a low voice. How far away it seemed, that dark morning walk and the lighted church. How little they had guessed that with the Angels of the Nativity should be the dark-robed Angel of Death ! In one home the children shouting with joy at the sight of the festive tree ; in the other a new-born soul, set free from its worn-out body, was carried, sleeping, through the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Neither the brother nor the sister was in the mood for conversation. They both felt the loss of their friend acutely ; the gentle old man had endeared himself to each of them. And Ned was disposed to reproach himself for his neglect.

'If I had not been so afraid of giving myself pain, I should have run up to see him all these months,' he said afterwards to Sheila. But she would not allow him to blame himself.

'It would not have been wise to break off your work. I do not think you were selfish, Ned ; Martha would be quite shocked at such an idea entering your head.' And this comforted him a little.

During the next few days Sheila almost lived at the Old Cottage, and Ned was a constant visitor. Martha seemed to depend wholly on them. For some days she was too ill to take any active part. The

sudden shock, after weeks of constant fatigue and anxiety, almost prostrated her, and Dr. Moorhouse was afraid of a serious breakdown. But the tender care of her friends, and her own patient acquiescence in her sorrow, helped her greatly. And, in spite of her feebleness, she was able to be present at the funeral.

Ned had pleaded and remonstrated in vain. It was the one point in which she opposed him.

'Edward, I must go, and you must take me,' was all she said. 'Indeed I can do it. I am stronger to-day; Dr. Moorhouse said so.'

Ned had to give way at last. 'It was utter madness,' he told Sheila; 'the idea of any one in her weak state being exposed to this weather.' For now the snow lay thick on the ground, and a piercing north wind swept Uplands.

'Most of the service will be in the church,' returned Sheila. 'And perhaps at the last moment we can persuade Martha not to follow to the churchyard. I fear we must not cross her, Ned.' But Sheila sighed in rather an oppressed manner as she spoke. She was secretly anxious about Luke Brett. The cold tried him, and he looked far from well; and she knew that Miss Gillian had begged him in vain to let Mr. Ducie take the service.

'He is as mad as a March hare,' observed Miss Gillian angrily. 'He will just be laid up with congestion or pleurisy—or Heaven knows what. And he declares that he means to take the early celebration too. I tell him that it is just flying in the face of Providence. But there, my dear, you might as well try to move a mountain.'

But Miss Gillian's voice was not clear, and her hands moved a little tremulously. The boy's obstinacy

and wrong-headness, as she called it, tried her sorely. To the last, Luke would be a boy to her.

‘It is very curious, Sheila, my love,’ she went on, ‘how people manage to inflict their own martyrdom on other folk. Good people, even the best of them, are selfish. They can’t quite get rid of the old Adam. Luke thinks he is posing as a correct parish priest; if you were to tell him he is digging his own grave, he would only answer, with a dry laugh, that it was all in the day’s work. But he never thinks of my feelings; I am to be martyred as well as he’; and Miss Gillian twinkled away a bright tear or two.

‘And I too,’ Sheila whispered to herself—‘and I too.’ But she tried to silence the inward voice by saying aloud, ‘When one member suffers, all the members suffer with it.’ But Miss Gillian evidently thought this a little vague, for she only shrugged her shoulders.

How Sheila prayed for a fine day! But as she and Ned hurried through the darkness in the early morning, the air was so keen and piercing that Sheila felt half frozen.

She tried not to think how hoarse Luke’s voice was, and to abstract herself from earthly anxieties, but she could not throw off a feeling of depression.

‘We shall have another fall of snow,’ observed Ned, with a glance at the heavy leaden sky, as they came out of the church. ‘My word, She, it is cold! You had better take my arm, my dear, for the path is a bit slippery.’

Martha went through the funeral service better than they expected. She shook her head when Ned, in a low voice, begged her to remain in the warm church.

'No, I cannot leave him,' was her reply ; and then she held out her hand to Betty.

Betty was the more visibly affected of the two ; she could hardly restrain her sobs as they followed the coffin. But though Martha trembled with cold and weakness, she was quite calm. They were together, all her loved ones, and only Betty and she were left. 'I shall go to them when my day's work is finished,' thought Martha.

Before the service was ended, the white flakes were falling fast. They fell on Luke's bare head. Once or twice he coughed, and Sheila thought she saw him put his hand to his side. How thankful she was when the little knot of mourners dispersed.

The Woodfords had few relations. Mr. Woodford's only remaining brother lived in New Zealand ; two distant cousins and the old family lawyer were the sole representatives.

'We have another cousin, Rebecca Borton,' Martha had informed Sheila. 'After Uncle Andrew, Cousin Becky is really our nearest relative. She was dear father's first cousin, and they were brought up together, and in her way she is rather nice.'

'Oh, Marty, how can you say so !' exclaimed Betty, when she heard this. 'I always thought her such a fussy, tiresome little old maid !'

'She is a little peculiar, certainly,' returned Martha ; 'but she has a good heart, Bee, and dear father always liked and respected her. He said she had had a hard life, and had shown so much pluck.'

'Cousin Becky has written so kindly to us,' Martha told Sheila the next day ; 'even Betty thinks it a nice letter. She is coming to see us soon, but she has had influenza and cannot be with us on Thursday, much

as she wishes to do so. She seems to feel father's death very much.'

'Perhaps she could stay with you a little,' suggested Sheila ; but Martha hesitated.

'We must have her for a few days by and by. She is not at all strong, and she thinks the journey a long one. She lives at Clapham, in a pretty old house facing the common ; it is her own house, but she has a very small income. I rather like Cousin Becky, only she fidgets Bee. But we must have her, I suppose' ; and Martha sighed wearily.

Ned had a long talk with the lawyer after the funeral. He looked very grave as he peeped in at the little fireside circle in the drawing-room at The Moorings and nodded to them. Sheila, who guessed that he wanted to talk to her, put Tommy off her lap and followed him upstairs.

'Well, Ned ?'

'Oh, it is just as I feared,' he returned, as he opened his tobacco-pouch. 'I must have my pipe, She, for I have to think things out, and they are in a bit of a snarl. The annuity ceases, of course, and they will only have about three or four hundred apiece. Mr. Stapleton suggests that they should give up the Cottage at Easter. He says Martha must rest and get strong before she can make her plans—there is no necessity to do things in a hurry. He is right there.'

'I hope he told Martha this?'

'Yes, and she seemed relieved to hear him say it. She is very weak. Stapleton did not say much to her, for he saw that she could not bear it ; she said thinking of business made her so giddy. He has promised to write and make things clear to her ; and then he had to go off and catch his train.'

'Why, that was hours ago. Have you been with Martha and Betty all this time?'

'Oh dear, no. Martha went up to her room directly he left; and as I wanted to see Brett, I jumped into Stapleton's fly and he dropped me at the vicarage.'

'Did you have your talk, Ned?' a little anxiously.

'Well, no. Brett is not well, and had to go to bed directly he got home; and Miss Gillian sent for Dr. Moorhouse.'

'I knew it!' exclaimed Sheila. 'I was sure he would take a chill; he has looked so ill all the week. What a state Miss Gillian will be in.'

'Well, she seemed a bit bothered, so I had some dinner with her, and tried to cheer her up, poor little body. Dr. Moorhouse says it is influenza, but there is a touch of pleurisy too. He is to have his fire kept in all night. I offered to sit up with him, but Brett only laughed at me. It seems that their old Emma is a first-class nurse, and she is going to look after him. Miss Gillian wanted to lie down on the couch in his room, but Brett wouldn't hear of it. He looks pretty bad, She.'

But Sheila, who looked somewhat pale, made no answer. Ned would have been astonished if he had read her thoughts. But she crushed them down resolutely; her next question was asked quite calmly.

'You will go early to inquire, Ned?'

'Why, yes, of course.'

'I shall see Miss Gillian myself later. Why did not Dr. Moorhouse propose the parish nurse? Mrs. Morse is such a nice creature, and I know Mr. Brett likes her. Emma is a capable person, but she is not strong.'

'Oh, there will be plenty of time to arrange all

that,' returned Ned easily. 'Dr. Moorhouse will settle things. I told them both that I was rather a handy person in a sickroom—you will endorse that, won't you, She?—but Brett declared that I did not look the character, and that old Emma would be good enough for the likes of him.'

'Do you mean he was able to joke?' asked Sheila rather abruptly.

'Oh, a man can always do that,' returned Ned. But he entered into no more particulars. Sheila was looking uncommonly tired, he thought, and it was no use piling up the agony. Luke's temperature had been very high and he had looked flushed and feverish.

'I will look in on him directly after breakfast,' he said. And then, as he had evidently finished with the subject, Sheila made her fatigue an excuse for leaving him and going to bed; but it was morning before she closed her eyes.

That night the flimsy veil was torn from Sheila's eyes, and for the first time she realised what Luke Brett was to her. 'My God, has it come to this!' she whispered in her agony—'has it actually come to this—that if he die the whole world will be blank to me!' And then she lay trembling and ashamed in the darkness, till sleep took pity on her sadness, and the evil hour passed away.

CHAPTER XXXII

'THERE MUST BE SOME ONE ELSE'

For him who aspires, and for him who loves, life may lead through the thorns, but it never stops in the desert.—ANON.

Great efforts from great motives is the best definition of a happy life.—CHANNING.

THE evil hour of despondency and mental distress was over, and Sheila rose the next morning in the wintry darkness to take up the day's burden with her usual courage. Sheila's nature was too sane and healthy-minded to be vanquished weakly in a single battle, or to sit down tamely at the foot of the hill of trouble, without using all her efforts to climb out of the low valley. She had too much pride and spirit to play the coward, or to turn her back on the enemy. The very simplicity and straightforwardness which were her chief characteristics helped her to attain a right focus. After all, was she so much to blame? What was the use of being morbid and increasing her unhappiness? Sheila did not deny that she was unhappy, but she saw things under a truer aspect that morning. It was her misfortune that she had grown to love this man, but she would not accuse herself of any sin. She had been blind, that was all. Their intimate and delightful friendship, her veneration for Luke Brett's opinion,

her trustful dependence on his support and sympathy, had all helped to deceive her. She had wandered in pleasant places with the heedlessness of a child picking flowers, and before she knew, she was on the verge of a precipice.

‘There is no sin in it,’ she whispered, ‘but it hurts—it must always hurt’; for a dull sense of anguish at the bottom of her heart told her that she would never be nearer to him. ‘Even if he cares for me, as I sometimes think he does,’ she said to herself, ‘I am not sure that he will ever tell me so. With all his goodness, I do not understand him; he is a sealed mystery to me. Sometimes I think that there must be some one else whom he has loved and lost, and that for her dear sake he cannot bring himself to marry. Miss Gillian is always a little mysterious about him; if she knows his secret, she will not tell it.’

Sheila would not have been human if she could have entertained the thought of a possible rival with any degree of equanimity. Not yet had she attained to such heights of unselfishness as to desire Luke’s happiness at the expense of her own—such sublime self-abnegation is not to be gained in a day. On the contrary, Sheila was disposed to envy even a dead woman in her supposititious grave, for her abiding sweet life in Luke Brett’s memory. Would she not herself be willing to give up years of life just to hear ‘I love you, Sheila’ from those grave firm lips!

‘It must always hurt,’ she had said to herself, and she was right; for to any woman, even the best and purest, unreturned love must be a thorny crown.

‘It is no use to deny that it is a heavy trouble,’ Sheila went on in that sad introspection, ‘and that inwardly I shall never be the old Sheila again. But

in time, and if nothing occurs to take him from me, I shall hope to grow content and peaceful. And, after all, I have his friendship, and surely that is worth any other man's love.' And when she had arrived at this conviction, Sheila took up her Prayer Book as usual.

It struck her as strangely significant that it opened of its own accord at Psalm xlv., 'God is our hope and strength : a very present help in trouble.' 'A very present help in trouble,' she whispered ; 'that will do for to-day.' And she closed the book.

If Ned noticed Sheila's pale face and heavy eyes, he made no remark. But as soon as breakfast was over he put on his ulster and set out for the vicarage. Sheila saw him as she passed through the hall.

'I shall not go to Martha until you come back,' she said quietly. 'Please give my love to Miss Gillian, and tell her that I shall be round presently.'

Ned was soon back. His report was fairly favourable ; if the invalid was no better, he was certainly no worse. Dr. Moorhouse had paid an early visit, and had told them that there was no need for uneasiness.

'Did you see him, Ned ?'

'Well, no. He had just dropped asleep after the doctor's visit, and as he had had a restless night and his cough had been troublesome, Miss Gillian did not wish him to be disturbed. Mrs. Morse is to sit up with him to-night, and Emma will remain with him until she comes. His temperature is still high, and he is very feverish—but of course the influenza must run its course.'

'I am glad Mrs. Morse is to have the night nursing,' returned Sheila, 'she is so experienced and careful.'

And then she went over to the Old Cottage to tell

the sisters the unwelcome news. They were both much shocked.

‘I thought Mr. Brett had a cold yesterday—his voice was so hoarse,’ observed Betty; ‘and I remember he coughed in the churchyard.’

‘If he only would have let Mr. Ducie read the service,’ sighed Martha; ‘Betty and I would have understood. It is grievous to think that he is suffering because he was too kind to disappoint us.’

‘Of course it was not wise, but it is no use thinking of that now’; for Sheila felt unwilling to dwell on this subject.

Then after a little while she left them and went on to the vicarage.

Miss Gillian had a worried look, but she greeted her favourite affectionately.

‘I hope you consider me a true prophet,’ she said at once. ‘I could scarcely attend to the service properly yesterday, I was so anxious. I knew how it would be when he came in flushed and coughing. I did not waste my time in scolding him; I just sent over for the doctor, and he ordered him to bed at once. But there, I don’t believe that I have had much more sleep than Emma had, for I was up and down a dozen times in the night, just to listen at his door.’

‘Dear Miss Gillian, you ought to have taken more care of yourself. It was such a bitter night, and that long passage is so draughty,—you will lay yourself up too.’

‘Then you will have to come and nurse me, for Emma can’t manage the pair of us. But how was I to rest in my warm bed, when my dear boy was so ill? You don’t look very fit yourself, Sheila’; and Miss Gillian looked at her with affectionate concern.

Sheila coloured a little painfully. ‘It was almost too

cold to sleep,' she returned hurriedly. Even Ned had complained, and she had been obliged to give him an extra blanket.

'Ned says I am to have a fire in my room to-night, so I mean to give him one too. Nell and Ivor say they do not mind the cold.'

'Your brother Ivor is to begin work, I hear.'

'Yes, on Monday. Ned seems to think the occupation will be good for him. He will have his luncheon with the Crowes; they live just by, you know. Mr. Crowe kindly proposed it, as Ivor is not strong. You see he is on friendly terms with them.'

'That is rather awkward for you,' observed Miss Gillian, who was a small aristocrat in her way.

'It is a little difficult, perhaps,' returned Sheila frankly; 'but Ned has made Ivor understand that we must not be drawn into the intimacy. It would be so much better if he and Nell could have a house of their own.'

'Yes, that would be the best plan. It never does for visitors to stay too long.'

And then, as Miss Gillian was busy, Sheila took her leave. But as she plodded heavily through the snow, the white landscape, lying under the low gray skies, failed to attract her attention. It was like a winding-sheet, she said to herself, as she shivered and drew her fur-lined cloak more closely around her.

That evening Ned and Kaiser paid another visit to the vicarage, but again he had not seen Luke. Dr. Moorhouse had given orders that he was to be kept as quiet as possible, as talking only made him cough.

'They can't induce Peter to leave the room,' continued Ned, 'except to take his meals, and then he scurries back and whines at the door until he is admitted. Miss Gillian says he lies as close to his

master's feet as possible, never moving, and only wagging his tail at the sound of his voice. She never in her life saw an animal so devoted. 'What, are you going to bed already?' in a surprised voice, as Sheila bade him good-night. 'I thought we should have a regular palaver.'

'Not to-night, I am too sleepy,' returned Sheila; 'we will leave it until to-morrow'; and though Ned was disappointed, he said no more.

Sheila certainly looked fagged and weary. All the week she had been helping those poor girls, and spending hours at the Cottage. 'Good old She, what should we all do without her?' he went on. 'I only know one man who is good enough for her'—and then Ned frowned over his pipe.

'I wonder if he ever means to marry,' he said to himself, in a puzzled tone. 'Somehow I fancy he has pledged himself to a life of celibacy, though he has never told me so. On the contrary, I heard him say once that a married vicar was more useful in a country parish, if he only has the right sort of wife. My word, would not Sheila make an ideal parson's wife?' But Ned would not pursue the thought. What was the use of building castles in the air? He would read a little and then turn in.

Sheila was aware that Ned wanted to consult her about many things, but she knew their best and quietest time for talk was when the others had retired to their rooms.

Ivor never followed his brother into the study unless he were specially invited. If he wished to smoke, he betook himself to the little back room where Nell sat. At such times she would keep him company.

'I am not sleepy to-night,' observed Sheila, as she

drew her chair close to the fire. It was bitterly cold ; but Ned had paid an evening visit to the vicarage and brought back a comforting report. The invalid's temperature was lower and he coughed less, and Dr. Moorhouse was quite satisfied with his patient's progress.

'We shall have him all right again in a week or two,' continued Ned with delightful optimism. 'It is a beastly night, She ; there is a sort of thaw, and I have had to wade through slush and snow ; but it will freeze again before morning. Miss Gillian brewed me a jorum of mulled claret before she would let me go—sugar and spice and all that's nice, you know. Miss Gillian is always so kind and hospitable.'

'Well, Ned, now for the palaver.'

'Ah, just so,' and Ned's face grew grave in a moment. 'My fortnight will be up on Wednesday, and this is Saturday, remember.'

'You will not go to your day, surely ?' in some surprise.

'No, I think I shall take another week. Martha is a shade better, but I hardly feel that I can leave her just now. And then there is Brett.'

'Yes, I see.'

'I suppose it will be best for me to go back for a few months. Martha must have time to pull herself together a bit before we make our plans.' And Sheila assented to this.

'They will have the Cottage until Easter, that will give them three months to think over things. By the by, Ned, I never told you Martha has had such a kind letter from Miss Borton—their Cousin Becky, you know. She wants to come to them the week after next for a couple of days. Next week Mrs. Allen is coming for a night.'

‘Yes, I know ; Martha is rather dreading it. She is very fond of Mrs. Allen, but she says even an old friend is an infliction just now, but that the Allens are so kind that they dare not refuse.’

‘I expect she will want Betty to go to them ; they have half adopted her already, and Katie never seems happy without her. Of course it is impossible for her to leave Martha alone unless——’ here Sheila hesitated. She was fully aware of the thought that lay deep in Ned’s mind, though he could not bring himself to utter it. But Sheila’s look and manner gave him courage.

‘She, tell me truly, do you think Martha could be induced to marry me at Easter ?’ Ned put the question desperately, he was evidently in earnest. Sheila recoiled for a moment.

‘Oh, that is too soon,’ she returned in rather a distressed tone. ‘I am sure Martha will think so. You must give her longer than that.’

‘Yes, under ordinary circumstances. But, Sheila, just look at it reasonably and dispassionately. Would it not save trouble and expense for Martha to come here when the Old Cottage is given up ?’

‘But there is no room, Ned, while Ivor and Nell are with us.’

‘Why, no, of course not,’ rather impatiently. ‘But surely by Easter Ivor could set up diggings of his own. Of course I shall have to maintain them until he gets into regular work ; but with care and economy we might manage for a year or two.’

‘Let me think,’ returned Sheila, pushing back her hair from her forehead. She had grown very pale, but she tried to hide her secret perturbation. ‘You will be earning nothing for the next two years, Ned.’

'Not if I write my book. There may be an article now and then for the *Circle*, just to keep my hand in, but we could not count on that. There are still two or three hundred pounds available for any emergency. I could allow Ivor a hundred and fifty a year, or even a little more. They might take one of those new cottages on the Ilford Road. It would not cost much to furnish it. Of course the road is not made, but the houses look decent. They only ask thirty pounds a year for the small ones.'

'Well, it is not a bad idea, Ned.'

'I knew you would say so,' brightening perceptibly. 'But that is not my only idea, She. There's the Old Cottage furniture; they will be obliged to dispose of that, and it is worth very little. A valuation could be made—Crowe will help us there—and I could buy what was required for Ivor. There are certain things that Martha wishes to keep, and they could be sent here at any time.'

'I did not know you were such a good business man, Ned,' with a faint smile. 'You seem to have thought of everything. Are you sure that Martha will allow you to buy the furniture?'

'Why not me as well as any other purchaser? I am likely to give a better price, and it would be far better than selling by auction. Martha is very sensible, she will soon see this for herself. The question is, Do you think, if we settle "Tommy and Co." in the Ilford Road, that they will be able to manage on the sum I name, or shall I make it a hundred and eighty?'

'I think a hundred and eighty will be better. Nell is not a very clever manager, and we have rather spoilt them at The Moorings.'

'I shall make Ivor clearly understand that the

allowance is only for a time,' went on Ned, a little sternly, 'and that I shall expect him to maintain his own family in the future. I shall wish my wife and sister to live in comfort. At least there is one thing on which you will agree with me, that Martha will be content with a very little.'

'Yes, dear, you are right there. But you have forgotten poor Betty. And then there is Jane.' Then Ned's face fell a little.

'I forgot poor old Jane,' he muttered. 'She and Eppie would never get on together, I am afraid. Jane is a little difficult, though she is a faithful old soul. As for Betty'—here he cleared up again—'Betty is like a kitten, she will certainly fall on her feet. Mark my words, She, we shall not have to house her at The Moorings.'

'Perhaps you are right, Ned. Well, on the whole, I think you are not unreasonable. But if you will take my advice, you will not scare Martha by proposing so early a date ; you are more likely to gain her consent if you name June or July.'

Now Ned was not willing to agree to this postponement of his happiness, and he argued the matter a little hotly from a masculine point of view. But Sheila held firmly to her opinion. Martha would be shocked at the idea of a hurried marriage ; she was far too unhappy and broken down at the present moment even to discuss it.

'Dr. Moorhouse is most anxious for her to have change of scene, and'—with difficulty suppressing a smile—'you would hardly call the other side of Sandy Lane change of scene.' This was rather a poser for Ned, and for the moment he made no reply. 'I wish you would tell me one thing,' went on Sheila, 'are

you and Martha engaged? Of course you understand each other, but I mean a regular, definite engagement.'

'Upon my word, I don't know, She'—and Ned's face wore a puzzled expression. 'I have said nothing to her that I can remember, but of course we are all right. Martha knows how pleased her father was about it, and that settles it, in my opinion.' And then Ned laughed a little consciously, for he knew that he took his lover's privileges pretty freely, and that Martha was far too sad and weak to resist. In his heart he knew well the comfort and support he was to her, and the silent gratitude of her eyes was sufficiently eloquent. Could he only have known how in her prayers she called him 'her dearest blessing'!

They talked late that night, and the upshot of the conversation was that Ned should not return to town for another ten days or so.

He would wait until Mrs. Allen's visit was over, and then he would open his heart to Martha and take counsel with her.

'I shall tell her that I cannot wait longer than July,' were Ned's concluding words. 'The wedding shall be as quiet as she likes. I will not even ask her to put off her mourning; though black doesn't suit her, and makes her look older—but what do such trifles matter. If we can only shunt "Tommy and Co.," the rest is easy enough'; and Ned straightened himself and took off his spectacles and laid them aside. 'My good child,' he said blandly, 'do you know it is nearly half-past one, and you have got black rings round your eyes with much thinking and want of sleep? Our palaver is over, so good-night and fair dreams to you.' And then he turned out the lamp and prepared to follow her.

CHAPTER XXXIII

‘ WE HAVE HAD A GOOD OLD TIME ’

Your gentleness shall force
More than your force move us to gentleness.
SHAKESPEARE.

Life runs not smoothly at all seasons, even with the happiest ; but after a long course the rocks subside, the views widen, and it flows on more equably at the end.—LAUDER.

SHEILA proved herself a true prophet ; for when Ned had his promised talk with Martha, and hinted plainly at his wish for an early marriage, the girl looked at him with such sad entreaty in her eyes that he hardly found courage to go on.

‘ You know, dear one,’ he said gently, ‘ that your father would wish me to take care of you ; the thought made him so happy.’

‘ Yes, I know,’ was the whispered reply.

‘ Sheila and I have arranged things,’ he went on hurriedly, for fear he should be stopped. ‘ The Moorings will be quite ready for its mistress by Easter. Ivor will have a little house of his own by then, and I shall have finished my London work, and shall be able to go on with my book here, with an occasional run up to town to verify facts. You tell me yourself,’ he went on, ‘ that Betty’s home until her marriage is to be with the Allens, and that she is to go to them at Easter ;

but when the Cottage is given up there will be no place for you.'

'I thought Betty told you that Cousin Becky wants me to go to her,' returned Martha quietly. 'But I suppose she forgot to mention it. Oh, I had the sweetest, kindest letter from her. She is not at all well off, and lives in such a tiny old-fashioned little house, and yet she wanted me to live with her. Isn't it generous, Edward—actually to offer me a home?'

'I hope you told her that you had a home of your own in prospect,' returned Ned drily.

'No, I kept that until I saw her. She is coming down next week. But of course under any circumstances I could not have accepted such an offer. Dear Cousin Becky, it was so sweet of her. But how could she think that I could consent to such a thing?'

'I should think not'—in a jealous tone. Then Martha's soft little hand stole into his.

'I could go to her for a few months when I leave the Cottage. Oh, Edward, don't look at me so reproachfully. It is not that I do not care to be with you, but I am thinking of you as well as myself. It would be so much better to wait a little. I know Sheila thinks so. I want to be strong and well before I come to you. If you knew how tired I feel'; and then she broke down and cried a little, like a child who was too weary for its fresh task.

This brought Ned to his senses, and he soothed and petted her in quite a fatherly way until she had recovered her calmness, and then they very soon arrived at an understanding. Miss Borton was to be informed of the engagement directly she arrived at the Cottage, and Martha was to arrange to go to her the

week after Easter, and to remain until the wedding, which was to be definitely settled for July.

It was better for many reasons that it should take place quietly in town. It could be in the early morning, as Martha wished, and no one but Sheila and Betty and Ivor need be present. Miss Borton's tiny establishment could provide a modest breakfast, and then they could go to Cromer or Ilfracombe for two or three weeks. Ned waxed radiant as they made their simple arrangements, and a sweet expression of happiness stole into Martha's sad eyes.

'I know I shall feel as though dear father and mother will be there too, seeing it all and blessing us.' Then Ned smiled as he kissed the earnest face.

How like a child she was in her simplicity and trust! He felt as though he worshipped her for her sweetness and goodness. She had given him trouble for a time, and he had found it difficult to silence all her scruples. 'Are you sure that I shall not be a burden to you?' had been her anxious question, and even when he had satisfied her fully on this point, she had asked him if Sheila really wished it.

'With all her heart,' had been his answer. But though this was certainly true as far as he knew it, Ned was in blissful ignorance of Sheila's intention to cut herself loose from her beloved Moorings. Sheila, who knew the kindness and unselfishness of her brother's nature, would keep her own counsel until her plans were made. She had not even told him that she intended to give up her room and move into the large attic when Ivor and Nell vacated it. What was the use of troubling him with these little feminine details? Sheila knew better than that. Until she could see her way more clearly, and had evolved some definite scheme for the

future, it was no use worrying Ned. Sheila would have a hard contest before her ; there would be a wordy warfare and much clashing of wills before she could carry her point victoriously.

'He will not understand for a long time why I consider it necessary to leave him and Martha together,' she thought sorrowfully. 'He will think it unkind of his old chum to desert him ; but all the same, I feel I am right' ; and here Sheila sighed, for she knew in her inner consciousness that it would be safer and better for her to be away from Uplands, even though it meant to her the plucking out of the right eye or the cutting off of the right hand.

Ned was too much wrapped up in his own blissful anticipations to notice any trace of effort or concealed sadness in his sister's affectionate congratulations. She did her part manfully, and then went over to the Cottage to assure Martha of her sympathy.

'You have made him so happy, dear,' she said as she kissed her. Then a lovely flush came to Martha's pale cheek.

'He was so good and patient,' she whispered, 'and I tried him so. Perhaps it is because I am so weak and tired, but I seemed afraid of my own happiness. It did not seem right to be happy so soon, and I could not help crying from sheer nervousness ; and then he was so dear and comforting, and somehow I felt father had left me in his care, and then all seemed right. Sheila,' with a loving look, 'are you sure that you are glad about this?'

'Glad that my dear old Ned is to be happy at last, and that I am to have a sweet sister of my own—why, what a question, Martha?'

'You will not let it make any difference?' hesitating

a little over her words. 'Indeed I have no wish to take your place——' But what more Martha would have said was silenced by a soft hand laid over her lips.

'No, my dear, I will not let you say it—it is just waste of breath. It is Ned's home, not mine, and Ned's wife must be its mistress. There shall be no rivalry between us, Martha; we shall be dear sisters and friends, and we shall love Ned too well to quarrel over him.' And Martha dared say no more.

Ned's fortnight was prolonged to a month; he seemed unable to tear himself away, and he seized on every excuse for remaining an additional week or so.

Mr. Brett was recovering slowly, and Ned's daily visit to the vicarage was a great pleasure to the invalid. Then there was Miss Borton's promised visit to the Old Cottage, and he gravely announced to Sheila that he thought it his duty to remain and be introduced to Martha's relative. Sheila suppressed a smile at the subtlety of this reasoning.

'You could call on her in town,' she observed. But Ned did not seem to see the force of this remark, and Sheila was too well pleased to have him a little longer to make any objection.

They had found a small house in the Ilford Road that would do nicely for Ivor. It was only just finished, and the papers were not hung. Both Ivor and Nell were charmed with it. Nell had cried a little at the idea of leaving The Moorings. To the poor girl it had been a perfect paradise of peace and plenty and freedom from care.

'I can't bear the thought of leaving you, Sheila,' she sobbed; 'for you have been such a good, dear sister to me. I am so afraid that I shan't manage properly,

and that Ivor will feel the difference.' But Nell soon cheered up at the prospect of having a little home of their own.

It was to be a very simple *ménage*, adapted to their small income. The two little sitting-rooms were divided by folding-doors, and there was a tiny garden, just large enough for the children to play in.

Martha was quite willing that some of the furniture of the Old Cottage should go to the house in the Ilford Road. At first she was distressed at the idea of selling it to Ned ; but he soon convinced her that it would be for his convenience and profit, and that, as the valuation was low, there would be comparatively little outlay on his part.

Miss Gillian, who took an immense interest in her friends' affairs, consulted her nephew and then made a most useful suggestion. Martha and Betty were to come to the vicarage while their goods and chattels were removed from the Old Cottage. They would be on the spot to overlook things and to help Sheila in her work of making Sydney Cottage habitable. Nell had chosen that name for her new abode.

'I shall not treat you as visitors,' she observed in a brisk voice ; 'we shall be too busy to stand on ceremony with each other. There will be a sort of "general post" being played between The Moorings, the Old Cottage, and Sydney Cottage, and we shall be just like a hive of bees' ; and then Martha had gratefully accepted the kind offer.

Sheila went over to the Cottage to be introduced to Miss Borton. Cousin Becky was not a very prepossessing person. She was the typical old maid—a pale, thin, precise little person, with a good deal of mannerism. But Sheila soon found out that she had a kind heart,

and that, like most unmarried women, she took great interest in a love-affair.

Mr. Edward Lassiter was pronounced to be an extremely gentlemanly and clever person. 'In fact, there is something distinguished in his appearance, my dear,' with a gentle wave of a mittened hand. Cousin Becky had very pretty hands, and it was one of her harmless peculiarities always to wear mittens—woollen in winter and silk in summer. 'I never feel dressed properly with bare hands,' she would observe when Betty teased her on this point.

'Herr Professor is a dear!' exclaimed Betty in her vivacious way; 'I mean to be exceedingly proud of my brother-in-law, Cousin Becky, though of course he is not as nice as my Charlie'; for Betty considered herself properly engaged now—at least Mr. Allen had withdrawn his proviso, although there was to be no talk of marriage for years to come.

'You will just take Katie's place and be our dear little daughter,' Mrs. Allen had said to her in her motherly way, 'and we will take care of you in the home nest until our Charlie can keep a wife.' And though Betty was grieved at the idea of parting with her sister, she was speedily consoled by the delightful prospect of paying long visits to The Moorings.

Cousin Becky was a little shocked at Betty's outspoken speech. In her opinion, it was not quite maidenly to speak of 'my Charlie' in that tone of appropriating fondness. There was so little modest reticence among the girls of the present day, she thought.

'As I do not know Charles Allen,' she returned primly, 'I cannot make comparisons, Bettina, even if it were wise to do so.' For it was another of Cousin Becky's peculiarities never to abbreviate names; indeed,

she would have greatly preferred her own baptismal name of Rebecca, only custom had been too strong for her.

Betty turned restive under this rebuke.

'Oh, what a frumpish little person Cousin Becky is!' she exclaimed to Sheila. 'To think of my poor dear Marty being condemned to stay with her in that poky little house for more than two months! How I should hate it. Charles Allen, indeed! and he has been called Charlie ever since he was born.'

'Miss Borton is a little old-fashioned in her ideas,' returned Sheila, smiling, 'but she is very harmless and amusing, and Martha seems quite fond of her.' But Betty refused to be complaisant.

'If Fate condemned me to be an old maid,' she observed, with a toss of her small head, 'I would take Miss Gillian for my model. She is just lovely, Sheila; so broad and breezy in her notions; no antiquated, mediæval ideas.' And perhaps in her secret heart Sheila agreed with her. Certainly Cousin Becky was a trifle out of date.

It was a satisfaction to Ned and Sheila to see how steadily Ivor applied himself to his new work. It was evident to both of them that idleness had grown irksome to him and that his occupation suited him. Nell told them that he never came home in the evening without going down the Ilford Road to look at the cottage. The idea of having a home of his own seemed to give him a feeling of self-respect. He took a great pride in planning little improvements, and as he was a good carpenter, he had plenty of employment for leisure hours.

As it was necessary to provide a small stock of household linen for the young couple, Ned arranged that Sheila should accompany him when he returned to town, and spend two or three nights in Heathcote Street.

‘The change will do you good, She, and I shall be able to introduce you to the Lockharts.’ And as Sheila saw that he really wished it, she made no objection ; and indeed the thought of having him to herself for two or three whole days was too tempting a proposition to be refused.

Ned was evidently reluctant to leave home again ; he tried hard to reconcile himself to his banishment. Sheila was secretly amused to hear him announce his intention of coming down regularly for the week-end every fortnight.

‘Of course I shall be too glad to have you,’ she returned, ‘but will it not unsettle you too much?’ But Ned stoutly combated this notion.

He would take the first train on Monday ; that would enable him to be in Heathcote Street before ten. ‘You see I have to look after Martha now’—in rather a conscious tone, for the ambitious author was merged in the lover. There was no denying that Herr Professor was very deeply in love, and that Martha was dearer to him than even literary fame.

Ned paid his parting visit to the vicarage on the afternoon before his departure. He brought Sheila the good news that Luke was able to come downstairs. ‘He does not look up to much yet, for he has had rather a sharp attack ; but when it gets warmer Moorhouse wants him to go to St. Leonards.’

‘I suppose Miss Gillian will go with him, Ned?’

‘Well, no. He has an old college friend living there, the Rev. Stephen Hawtrey—he is the vicar of St. James’s—and Brett will stay with him. It is a very comfortable bachelor establishment, and the house-keeper is an old friend of his.’

‘That seems a nice arrangement,’ returned Sheila,

but she said no more. She was wondering inwardly how long it would be before she saw Luke Brett again. To her these weeks had seemed interminable. She had paid frequent visits to the vicarage, and more than once she had taken a few flowers for the sickroom. 'I know Mr. Brett is so fond of flowers,' she had said to Miss Gillian; and each time he had sent her a cheery little message of thanks.

'Luke never will have your flowers thrown away if he can help it,' Miss Gillian had remarked once. 'He makes me put them on the little table where he keeps his books, because he likes to look at them. He declares no one arranges flowers as you do'; and Sheila went home that day feeling as though she had received some rare gift.

There was no doubt that the little change to town did Sheila a world of good. Ned—who found her society extremely pleasant—urged her to remain a week; but Sheila could not be persuaded to prolong her visit beyond the three days. But they contrived to get a good deal of enjoyment into that short time. When their marketing was finished, Ned took her to the Tate Gallery and the Wallace Collection. On Thursday evening they went to the Lockharts', and Ned had the satisfaction of introducing her to some of his new friends. A concert at St. James's Hall and the theatre made up the other evenings.

'It is a good thing I am going home to-morrow,' observed Sheila, as they sat over the fire that last evening. The sitting-room at 9 Heathcote Street was a dingy little apartment, but by no means comfortless—though every available space was filled with Ned's books and papers, and Sheila's first task had been to evoke order out of chaos. 'You have done no work

since I have been here, so you will be glad to get rid of me.'

'Nothing of the sort,' he returned with energy. 'We have had a good old time, She, and I only wish'—checking a sigh—'that I were going back with you. Well,' cheering up, 'you will see me walk in on Saturday week, so it won't be a long separation. Now, as it is pretty late, I won't keep you up, for you have had a tiring day'; and as Sheila could not deny this, she was thankful to be dismissed.

'Yes, they had had a good old time,' she thought, re-echoing her brother's words, as she laid her weary head on the pillow. 'Ned had been so dear and kind, so thoughtful for her comfort. They had had one or two of their old confidential talks as they had sat over their cosy meals, or as they had walked through the crowded streets. She had been so happy, so contented to be alone with him. And yet—and yet——' Sheila wetted her pillow with tears.

CHAPTER XXXIV

BETWEEN THE LIGHTS

We live truly, exactly in proportion as we go out of ourselves and enter into the fulness of the experience of those whom we serve, and by whom in turn we are served.—WESTCOTT.

The heart has reasons that reason does not understand.—BISHOP JACQUES BOSSUET.

NED had begged his sister to call at the vicarage as soon as possible after her return, and to send him news of the invalid ; so Sheila made up her mind to go the following afternoon.

It was a bleak, sunless day, and the wind had veered to the east. Nell had declared shiveringly that nothing would tempt her to leave the fireside ; but Sheila, who had wrapped herself warmly, protested that exercise would be good for her. ‘Perhaps I shall have tea with Miss Gillian,’ she observed, ‘so you had better not wait for me.’ But for once she had reckoned without her host. To her surprise Miss Gillian was out, and was not expected back until late. She had driven over to Heslop vicarage to see a sick friend.

This was so unexpected that Sheila stood hesitating a moment before she inquired after the vicar. He was much better, the maid told her, and gained strength every day. And then Peter pattered down the hall to

greet her, and as Sheila caressed him the study bell rang and the girl asked her to wait a moment.

‘My master may wish to send a message,’ she said, ‘or perhaps he would like to see you.’ Then Sheila felt herself colour with embarrassment as she stooped over the dachshund. After all, it would be only civil and friendly to wait, she thought to herself. The next minute the maid returned.

‘The master would be glad to see you, ma’am,’ she said ; and Sheila followed her at once. She had had a faint hope that perhaps Miss Gillian would suggest a visit to the invalid, but she was hardly prepared for seeing him alone ; but she tried to repress her nervousness.

She knew the study well. It was a beautiful room, with a large bay window overlooking the garden. A small side window commanded a view of the church and churchyard. Luke Brett was sitting in an easy-chair drawn close to the fire, but he rose when he saw her and held out his hand with a smile.

‘I heard your voice,’ he said quietly. ‘Anne was telling you that my aunt was out, but I hope you did not intend to go away without seeing me.’

‘I did not know ; I could not be sure that you would care to see a visitor,’ stammered Sheila. Perhaps he saw how his question embarrassed her, for he dropped her hand and looked round for a chair.

‘Let me fetch it myself,’ she pleaded ; ‘and please sit down, Mr. Brett, for you do not look fit to stand.’

‘I am afraid you are right,’ he returned reluctantly, ‘but I am sorry to be so inhospitable. Anne ought to have given you a chair. Isn’t it strange, Miss Lassiter, how influenza pulls one down ? I am as weak and good-for-nothing as though I had been

through a long illness, and yet Moorhouse rubs his hands triumphantly when he sees me, and assures me that I am a credit to my nurses.'

Luke Brett was trying to put her at her ease, for his keen perception told him that his appearance was a shock to her, and that she had not expected to see him like this.

There could be little doubt to her now that he had been seriously ill, though Ned had always pooh-poohed the notion of danger. Yet Luke Brett knew himself that he had had a by no means distant glimpse into the Dark Valley.

'It has been a sharp attack,' he said, answering her thought, 'and I look rather a gaunt specimen at present. "A scarecrow priest," as Lassiter called me.' But Sheila could only summon up a faint smile in reply.

It was not only that Luke Brett looked hollow-eyed and attenuated; that his spare form seemed shrunken, and that he stooped with weakness; but there was something ethereal in his expression. Sheila felt a strange sinking of heart as she looked at him.

'Ned never told me,' she returned in a pained voice; 'but I can see now for myself how ill you have been. But you are better now—you grow stronger every day?' There was something almost imploring in Sheila's tone.

'Oh yes, I am "making haste slowly," as the good old Saint has it. But Rome was not built in a day, and it takes time to get over a sharp attack of influenza and pleurisy.' Luke tried to speak in his usual manner, but Sheila's gentle sympathy and her evident distress touched him too closely, and there was a sudden shadow of pain in his eyes. But it passed in a moment, and he turned to her with a smile.

‘Do you know what a godsend you are to me this afternoon?’ he asked. ‘I was just wishing that your brother were within reach, that we could have one of our talks. I was feeling indisposed for my own company and not in the mood for reading; and then the sound of your voice reached me, and I could not resist the temptation of sending for you.’

‘I am so glad you did.’

‘Yes, and now you are here, you must promise not to hurry away. Why should you not stay and have tea with me? Come, Miss Lassiter, it will be a real charity; and there is so much I want to ask you, and I have not seen you for five weeks.’ Luke’s voice was dangerously persuasive.

‘If you are sure that I shall not tire you, and that Miss Gillian will approve.’ Sheila was not certain that she was doing the right thing, but how could she refuse when her heart was yearning to comfort him? They were friends, dear friends, and always would be, and there could be no possible harm for her to stay if he wanted her; there was no need to be prudish or over-scrupulous.

‘I can answer for Aunt Gill,’ he returned cheerfully; ‘she was lamenting my solitary afternoon, and hoping that some kind neighbour might drop in. You had better take off your cloak, for the room is warm.’ Then Sheila, with fingers that trembled a little, laid aside her wraps.

‘There now, we can be comfortable, and you can open your budget. Draw your chair a little closer to the fire; and if you would be good enough to touch that log, we shall have light enough to see each other’s faces. Don’t you love the gloaming, Miss Lassiter, when the fire burns brightly and one’s thoughts are not too heavy?’

‘Well,’ as Sheila reseated herself, ‘and so your brother’s affairs are all happily settled, and he and Miss Woodford are to be really married in July?’

‘Ned thought it better not to wait any longer,’ she returned. ‘Martha has no home, you know. Of course Miss Borton would have been glad to keep her for a few months, but Ned said the life would try her. Miss Borton is one of those excellent persons that one loves best at a distance.’

‘I know what you mean.’

‘She would be very good and kind to Martha,’ went on Sheila, ‘but her views of life and men are extremely limited and one-sided. Her only enthusiasms are for total abstinence and missions to the Jews. To knit little woollen jugs and fill them with pence is a positive joy to her. She is extremely evangelical; and a work meeting at the vicarage or a temperance lecture are her only forms of dissipation.’

Mr. Brett smiled. ‘I have met women of Miss Borton’s type—good creatures in their way, but a little trying to the masculine mind. I think Lassiter is right, and that Miss Woodford will be far happier at The Moorings. Oh, by the by, I meant to ask you——’ But Sheila hurried on as though she had not heard this; she knew well the question he meant to put, and was anxious to avoid it.

‘Ned has told you, of course, about the house in the Ilford Road that he has taken for Ivor?’ And then, as Luke expressed a wish to hear all she could tell him, she launched out on a full description of Sydney Cottage.

‘It really seems as though it will turn out well,’ returned Luke thoughtfully, ‘and they have certainly been long enough at The Moorings. But I hope it will

not be long before your brother gets some paying work. It is a heavy pull on Lassiter's purse, especially as he will have a wife as well as a sister.'

'Martha is a good manager,' she returned quickly, 'and Ned has a little put by for a rainy day. We feel far more hopeful about Ivor too. It is not only that his health has so wonderfully improved during these few months, but that he seems to settle down so well to his work. Did you ever hear that Robert Crowe has a cousin in Wolverhampton who is in rather prosperous circumstances?' And as Mr. Brett shook his head, she went on: 'He is a land-agent and surveyor in rather a large way, and the firm is a sound one. When Ivor has learnt his business, and is worth his salt, Mr. Crowe is going to speak to his cousin about him. Very possibly they could find him some work. At present it is better for him to be near us; but as time goes on we both agree that it would be wiser for him not to settle down at Uplands.'

'Lassiter was saying something of the kind to me on his last visit,' observed the vicar, 'and I told him that he was perfectly right. It would be for the benefit of you all if later on the "Tommy and Co." *ménage*, as he calls it, is transferred to a different and more distant locality. I know you are a peace-loving family, Miss Lassiter, but human nature is human nature, and Sydney Cottage is a little too near The Moorings.'

'Of course I know you are right'—a little sadly. 'Poor Nell is wonderfully improved, but I am afraid Ned and Martha would always find her trying. She has so little tact, poor girl; and though she is so anxious to please, she generally contrives to say the wrong thing. Ned declares that she gets on his nerves.'

It is a wonder to both of us how Ivor puts up with her—he is seldom impatient with her.'

'You see, he is used to her, and she is the mother of his children, and doubtless she has been a good wife to him. It is a blessing that we are not all thin-skinned, Miss Lassiter. Well, things seem moving pretty smoothly in their different grooves, and at present we have not come to any rut or snag to trip us up—let us hope the course will be clear to the end. And for yourself'—and here Luke's eyes looked at her a little searchingly—'I trust your brother's marriage will make no difference to you.'

'How do you mean?' she faltered. 'Of course there cannot be two mistresses at The Moorings. I must give up my place to Martha.'

'Will that trouble you?' There was a touch of concealed anxiety in Luke Brett's voice.

'Not in the way you mean,' returned Sheila; 'I hope I am not so selfish. You must not think that I grudge Ned and Martha their happiness—it is far too beautiful.'

'I could never think you selfish.' Luke's tone was strangely abrupt. He seemed as though he would say more, but on second thoughts checked himself.

'No, I am not bad enough for that,' in a low voice; 'but you see Ned and I have been house-mates so long, and it will take time to get used to the new order of things.' And then as she spoke a sudden overwhelming desire to seek Luke Brett's help and sympathy came over her. The talk seemed to be doing him good. He had lost his expression of intense weariness, and each moment he looked more like himself. She knew that she could rely upon him—that he would be as safe and secret as the grave. She could trust him absolutely,

and yet some vague, undefined feeling made her hesitate. But to those keen eyes the trouble in her face was as clear as daylight.

‘Of course you will remain at The Moorings?’ he asked with an abruptness that almost took Sheila’s breath away.

‘Yes, I think so—at least for the present. After that I must make my plans.’ But the next question was so gently put, in such a tone of full understanding and sympathy, that a slight mist gathered in the gray eyes.

‘Do you mind telling me all about it? It would be truly kind and friendly on your part, and I shall be so interested—you are sure of that, are you not?’

‘Yes, oh yes; you are always so good and patient.’

‘The goodness and patience are on your side, I think, but I certainly want to help you. I hope you are not going to tell me that The Moorings is not to be your home.’

‘How can it be?’ she answered sorrowfully. ‘Do you think that I could live there happily in idleness, when I know all the heavy responsibilities that are on Ned’s shoulders—when he is keeping Ivor and his family as well as a wife—do you think my heart or my conscience could be satisfied with such a life?’

‘If I know your brother, as I certainly do, he will assuredly refuse to part with you.’ Then Sheila smiled very sadly, and her face was very pale.

‘At first he will be angry and hurt with me, but in time he will come round—he always does. Mr. Brett, please do not tell me I am wrong. There are some things that a woman must decide for herself.’

‘And this is one of them, you would tell me?’

‘Yes, I think so. If I could bring myself to ask any one’s advice, I would ask yours, but my mind is made up. Ned and Martha will be all-sufficient to each other—they will not need me. For my own peace of mind, for my own happiness, I must find some work to do, and it cannot be found at Uplands.’

‘But what can you do? Have you any plans?’

‘Not at present; I must take time to consider. I am accustomed to teaching, but I do not wish to be a daily governess again. A post of housekeeper in some widower’s family where there are children to mother and teach, or in some household where the mother is an invalid, or perhaps better than all, some useful position in the parish of an overworked clergyman, to do district work or superintend schools—I have thought of all these things.’

‘Miss Lassiter, it is no use saying I am sorry—I hardly need to tell you that. Neither dare I take the responsibility of saying you are wrong—I have far too much reliance on your good sense.’

‘Oh, thank you for saying that!’

‘But all the same, it is no light trouble to me. But there are two things I want you to promise me. Will you take plenty of time before you mature your plans—do nothing, take nothing in a hurry? And before you decide anything, will you consult your friends at the vicarage? You do not know my Aunt Gillian; she has one of the clearest heads and the soundest hearts that I know.’

‘I think I can promise you that,’ returned Sheila, touched at this kindly consideration.

‘You must not stand alone,’ he continued gravely, ‘and I know that you will not consult your brother. But you have given me your promise, and I can trust

you. Oh, here comes Anne with the tea, and we shall both be better for the cup that cheers but does not inebriate. No,' as Sheila glanced at him inquiringly, 'our talk has not tired me; on the contrary, I feel more my own man. But, if you will, we will put by all troublesome topics awhile.' And Sheila willingly assented to this.

The firelight was so bright that the small shaded reading-lamp beside Mr. Brett's chair sufficiently illuminated the room. As Sheila took her place at the little tea-table she was conscious of a new sensation. She had often before made tea for the vicar, and yet this evening it seemed different. She was alone with him in his own sanctum, and as she waited on him it seemed to her as though some fresh bond of sympathy united them.

Luke accepted her services quite naturally. He talked in a pleasant, desultory fashion of the prizes he meant to give for the best cottage gardens, and how he meant to have a prize competition in the schools for the best and most tasteful arrangement of wild-flowers.

'It was you who gave me the idea,' he went on. 'I used to lie and look at your flowers, and think how beautifully they were grouped and arranged. They were the one spot of brightness on a very dark day, and they brought me a sweet message.' Luke spoke with deep feeling.

'I think there ought always to be flowers in a sick-room,' returned Sheila quietly. 'But it is growing late, and I fear I must go.'

'Then I will not keep you. Do you know how much good you have done me? I was feeling a little down and east-windy, and my thoughts were leaden

like the skies. But to-night I shall think more of your difficulties than my own. You will come again soon, and then we will finish our talk ?'

'Oh yes, I hope so.'

'It must be soon,' he repeated as he took her hand. 'I daresay they told you that I am to be sent away. Dr. Moorhouse insisted on it, so I am afraid I must give in.'

'But you will not go yet ?'

'No, not until the weather is milder and I get my marching orders. We shall have plenty of time for that talk.' And then with a smile and a low 'God bless you!' he let her go. But that smile, so grave and inscrutable, and yet so strangely sweet, haunted Sheila as she walked back in the darkness.

CHAPTER XXXV

TOLD IN THE GLOAMING

The shadow of human life is traced upon a golden ground of immortal hope.—GEORGE S. HILLARD.

SHEILA was quite sure that Miss Gillian would come to The Moorings the next day, and she was not the least surprised when she saw a quaint little figure in a red cloak and a Victorian bonnet coming up the garden path quite early in the morning.

‘So you were the “angel unawares,”’ observed Miss Gillian abruptly, as Sheila took her into the warm dining-room. ‘There I was, glumping and glowering all the way to Heslop because there would be no one to give Luke his tea and cheer him up a bit, and he so sick and tired of his own company, poor laddie. And there I found him as brisk as possible.

“I have had a visitor, Aunt Gill,” he said in quite a cheerful voice. “Miss Lassiter has been talking to me the greater part of the afternoon; and she made tea for me too—quite as well or even better than Dame Trot,”—for that’s the name Luke calls me sometimes, when he is in an irreverent mood.

“And very pretty behaviour too,” was my reply, “and what one might expect of a good Christian young woman like Sheila Lassiter, who knows her duty and does it.”

“I say ‘Amen’ to that, Aunt Gill.” And there

was Luke rubbing his hands quite pleased.' And after this long and slightly complicated speech, Miss Gillian planted herself in front of the fire and prepared for conversation.

Miss Gillian's society was always delightful to Sheila, and a warm attachment had grown up between them,—very few days passed without their meeting. Before her visit ended, Miss Gillian had fixed another afternoon for Sheila to come to the vicarage. 'We will have tea in the study,' she went on, 'and you can keep Luke company for a bit, while I go round to the schools to give out the books.'

'Could I not do it for you?' asked Sheila, turning resolutely away from this tempting prospect; but Miss Gillian would not hear of this.

'I shall not be more than three-quarters of an hour, and you can talk to Luke until I come back. He seemed rather pleased with my little plan. So I will have some of your favourite scones baked, and we will have a real cosy time.' And then Miss Gillian gave her a hearty kiss and bustled away like a veritable Dame Trot, leaving a glow of pleasurable anticipation in Sheila's heart. What those visits to the vicarage meant to her only Sheila herself knew.

Outwardly she seemed as usual. Ivor and Nell found her as cheerful and considerate as ever, and Bunnie and Tommy hailed her as their favourite play-fellow. Her visits to the Old Cottage were the chief events in the day to Martha and Betty; she was never weary of discussing their little plans, and suggesting all sorts of arrangements for their comfort. And yet not one guessed at the hidden sadness beneath that quiet exterior—the pain, the unrest, the secret trouble that often kept her wakeful at nights.

‘I must make the most of these visits before I leave Uplands,’ she said to herself as she walked quickly towards the vicarage. It was a bright sunshiny afternoon, and there was a promise of spring in the air. The borders in the vicarage garden were full of snowdrops, and a blackbird in the acacia was calling to his mate in quite a jubilant tone. Spring, with its glorious hopes and surprises, its budding leaves and blossoming hedgerows, the deep hidden treasures that brown Mother Earth carries in her bosom and brings to light—that time of youth and joy, of mating birds and diligent nest-builders, would soon be stealing upon them; but to Sheila it brought this year no special message of sweetness.

‘Next spring I shall not be at The Moorings,’ that was what she was telling herself as she stood in the porch. ‘In what corner of this wide world shall I find rest for the sole of my foot when I have left the dear home nest?’ And this thought was so saddening that Sheila’s face was unusually grave as Anne ushered her into the study.

Mr. Brett was at his writing-table. In the clear afternoon light the delicacy of his appearance was still more apparent, and Sheila was painfully struck by his wasted look. But his smile was very bright.

‘I am glad you have come early,’ he said in a cheery voice, ‘for you can talk to Aunt Gill while I finish these letters, and then I shall be free.’

‘Come away to the fire, Sheila,’ interposed Miss Gillian; ‘there’s a snug corner for you, and we will have our chat. No, you won’t interrupt him. Luke will take no heed to us, and there are a hundred questions I want to ask you.’

It was evident that Luke Brett had not yet

enlightened Miss Gillian on the subject of Sheila's plans—he would probably take his own time and opportunity for that—for she chatted mostly about Martha's affairs, and about certain pet *protégés* of hers in the parish who were giving her trouble. Tim Rodney had broken out again, and was always tippling at the Green Man, and that nice little wife of his was in sad trouble. Jack Smithers had made up his mind to go to sea, though his poor mother was breaking her heart about it. He ought to be horse-whipped, the cold-hearted, ungrateful gossoon,' continued Miss Gillian, with a worried expression on her fine old face ; 'and Jack the very apple of his mother's eye, and she a poor sickly body, with all those children to feed and clothe !'

'Jack would be off her hands,' returned Sheila rather absently. From her corner she could see the dark, clearly-cut profile silhouetted against the wintry light. Now and then Luke's hand rested idly on the paper, and his eyes were fixed dreamily on the strip of sky over the churchyard elms. No, he was not heeding them ; his thoughts were far away. Once she heard him sigh, and then he straightened himself, and his pen was at work again. Luke Brett had correspondence in every quarter of the world. He never lost touch with any of the men or lads who left his parish to seek their fortunes abroad. 'Vicar never forgets a chap,' as one of them observed ; 'sure as Christmas comes round, there's a letter and news of all the home folk, to hearten a fellow when he is a bit down on his luck.'

Miss Gillian chatted on in her bright, brisk fashion ; and then the dusk crept on, and Anne brought in the tea-tray, and Luke laid down his busy pen.

‘Do not light the lamp, Aunt Gill,’ he observed as he took possession of his easy-chair. ‘We have a glorious fire this evening, and I know Miss Lassiter loves the gloaming as much as I do.’ And though Miss Gillian pretended to grumble, and protested that she should pour the hot water into the milk-jug by mistake, she was quite willing to enjoy the blind man’s holiday; and the pleasant hour passed quickly away, until it was time for her to go to the schools to give out the books of the lending-library.

Sheila murmured something about going home, but Miss Gillian would not hear of this.

‘You will just stop and amuse Luke until I come back,’ she said peremptorily. ‘He has done enough writing for the day, and talking will be better for him.’ And then Miss Gillian stirred the fire so briskly that Sheila was driven away from her snug corner, and had to seek refuge in a more sheltered seat that Luke Brett placed beside him.

‘Aunt Gill’s intentions were good, but this fire is simply roasting,’ he observed, as he handed her a screen. ‘Well, Miss Lassiter, I have got my marching orders. Moorhouse wants me to go down to St. Leonards next week. I have just written to Hawtrey to tell him so.’

‘Shall you be away long?’ Sheila put the question very quietly.

‘For a month at least; and as Moorhouse has forbidden work for six weeks or more, I may as well pay Hawtrey a long visit. We are old chums, and think alike on most subjects. He has one of the clearest heads I know, and a fund of good-nature that is perfectly inexhaustible. With your permission, I intend to tackle him on this business of yours.’

Sheila coloured ; she looked a little surprised.

‘Mr. Hawtrey has never seen me,’ she returned in a low voice.

‘No, but your brother has met him, and they took to each other at once. Stephen Hawtrey is a splendid fellow, Miss Lassiter, and he is acquainted with a good many influential people. I know of no one who would be more likely to give us valuable advice. You have no objection, I hope, to my consulting him.’

‘Not if you think it well to do so,’ replied Sheila quickly.

‘Thank you. I am sure it will be the best thing to do. I have not taken Aunt Gill into confidence yet—there has been no time. Besides, I have a lurking hope that you may still change your mind, and that you may be induced to stay at The Moorings. I am afraid I am selfish, Miss Lassiter, for I—that is, we—do not want to lose you.’

‘You are very kind,’—Sheila’s voice was not quite steady, the hand that held the screen shook a little,—‘but my mind is fully made up. It is my duty, and I must go.’

‘My dear friend, there is such a thing as a mistaken duty ; self-sacrifice can sometimes be carried too far.’

‘Not in this case,’ returned Sheila hurriedly. ‘Mr. Brett, I know you want to help me, and this is why you are speaking in this way. But if you knew all my reasons, you would think I was right to go.’

‘Cannot you tell me what they are?’

‘No, no,’ in a frightened tone, ‘certainly not. But, all the same, you can trust me. I am not morbid, and I have no wish to make myself or any one else uncomfortable. It is not easy for me to go.’

‘Do you think I do not know that?’ Luke’s tone

was a little peculiar. One of the logs had fallen on the hearth, and a fierce flame had shot up, terrifying Peter out of his little wits, and by the sudden illumination he had caught sight of an agitated face and eyes full of wistful pain. Then the flame died down again ; but that moment's revelation was enough. Luke Brett leant back in his chair as though he were conscious of sudden weariness, and for a few minutes there was perfect silence in the study. When he spoke again, it was in a different voice. ' Very well, we may consider the matter settled, and I will have a talk with Hawtrey. And now shall we change the subject, for I see it worries you ? There is something I have often thought I would tell you, because we are friends, you and I—something about myself, an old trouble. That is, if you care to listen ? '

' Most certainly I care.'

' And I have an odd desire to tell you ; and the impulse to speak is stronger than ever this afternoon. Perhaps it is because I see so plainly that you are unhappy.' Luke Brett's voice was so full of quiet sympathy that Sheila's eyes filled with sudden tears. But she must not think of herself. He has hinted at some old trouble. Was he going to speak to her of that other woman for whose sake he lived unwedded ? His next words made her start.

' You are, of course, aware that I am not a strong man, and that in many ways I have to be careful. I think I told you once that my weak health was caused by a severe accident in my Oxford days. Up to that date I was in splendid condition, and had more than my fair share of health.'

' An accident ! Oh yes, I remember.'

' Let me tell you about it ; we shall have plenty

of time, for Aunt Gill will not be back yet. In my undergraduate days I was a great athlete. I was devoted to boating, and had the good luck to row in the Eights. I was never in better form than I was that June day. Hard as nails from my training, and looking forward to the long vacation and a walking tour that Hawtrey and I had planned to take in the Austrian Tyrol—for we were chums even then.

‘I had very nearly finished my Oxford course, and fully hoped to be ordained that year. Hawtrey and I had both worked at times at the Oxford Mission, and had got in touch with the vicar of St. Philip’s, Haggerston. That day the choirmen and boys and the organist of St. Philip’s were coming down to Oxford for their annual treat, and Hawtrey and I intended to give them a good time; and after doing the round of the colleges, it was unanimously decided to go on the river, though one or two of the lads preferred loafing about on the banks. It was a lovely evening, and men and boys were in the highest spirits. There were two boats—Hawtrey steered one, and I the other—and I remember how sweet the boys’ voices sounded as they sang one glee after another.

‘Two or three of the men knew how to handle their oars, but others of the rough Haggerston lads were raw recruits. They were full of monkey tricks, and I had to speak rather sharply to them, for, as we were nearing the weir, an upset would be awkward, especially as very few of the lads could swim. I was just thinking we had had about enough of it and had better turn back, as the boys were getting out of hand and seemed bent on mischief, when I saw a small pleasure steamer bearing down on us, and at once altered our course. For the last quarter of an hour we had been closely

followed by a boat full of rough-looking, hulking lads. Hawtrey, who had gone ahead of us, told me afterwards that they were certainly intoxicated, and that they had very nearly run him down. But I had no means of endorsing this ; I was just steering for the bank, to avoid being run down by the steamer, when there was a sudden shock, the nose of the other boat was in our side, and the next moment we were all capsized and in the water together.'

'Good heavens !'

'It is not a pleasant retrospect, I assure you. We were on the edge of the weir, Hawtrey was some distance off, and it was some minutes before the steamer perceived our plight.'

'And the boys could not swim ?'

'Not more than two of them. But happily the bank was near, and I was in splendid training ; I brought in four of them, and Hawtrey and the steamer did the rest. Thank God, not one of them was drowned. But it was Peterson, the senior choirman, who did for me.

'Poor fellow, he had sunk twice, and I had to tow him ashore like a log. We were both of us nearly over the weir. I was pretty well used up by then, for he was a big man and excessively heavy. "Drawn out of deep waters"—upon my word, Miss Lassiter, I do not know how we were either of us saved—it was a miracle. If help had not come, I could not have got him up the bank. But, God be thanked, two navvies hauled us in. They soon brought Peterson round, but when Hawtrey saw me first he thought I was dead.'

If her life had depended upon it, Sheila could not have spoken at that moment. The hand that held the screen trembled so exceedingly that she was obliged

to lay it down on her lap. But Luke's eyes were fixed on the fire, and after a minute's silence he went on in the same calm, level voice :

'I had a long illness after that, and my mother and Aunt Gillian nursed me. Hawtrey had his walking tour without me, and my ordination was deferred for eighteen months.'

'And it nearly killed you?'—in a choked voice. Then Luke looked at her with a smile that was strangely sweet.

'Yes, nearly, but not quite. I think sometimes I was spared for my mother's sake. Poor Peterson too had a wife and family. We have been the best of friends, he and I, ever since. Miss Lassiter, I have never been the same man since that day.'

'You mean——' and then Sheila stopped as though she could not say another word.

'I mean, that my life will probably be a short one. I have consulted more than one specialist, and they tell me frankly that there is nothing to be done. I have overstrained the machinery, and at any moment it may refuse to work. It is heart disease of the worst kind, and any fatigue, any sudden emotion, may terminate my life.'

Again a dead silence—so intense that Peter stirred restlessly on the rug. If only Luke had seen her face—but his eyes were again fixed on the fire.

'You must not be too sorry for me,' he went on quietly, as though he understood her lack of speech. 'It will be a merciful death, and I shall not suffer ; and I have long made up my mind to this. Until the call comes, I must do my half-day's work.'

'Mr. Brett'—Sheila's voice was a little hoarse, and she drew her breath heavily—'I want to speak—I

must speak—but you—have given me a shock—I did not expect this.'

He would have spoken, but she went on in a sort of breathless rush :

'If you took more care—if you rested—if you worked less—would not—would not——' But he finished the sentence for her.

'I might live a few more months or years—that is what you mean? Yes, probably ; but would it be life or mere vegetable existence? And remember I am vowed to service. While I live, I work ; and if God wills, I would die in harness.'

'Then it is hopeless?' Luke winced as he heard her tone, and then again he braced himself.

'No, not hopeless, but full of hope. My dear friend, surely you believe in the continuity of life? What does it matter if our work is done here or there—so that, like Him, we are about our Father's business? Only it will be better done there.' He paused, and then walked towards the fireplace, while she sat watching him in dumb misery.

'You know now why I have never married,' he said presently, as he touched the now smouldering logs so lightly that they did not blaze—'why I do not think it right to marry ; for how could I bring such certain trouble into a woman's life?' He paused. 'Hark, is not that the front-door bell? It must be Aunt Gillian. Miss Lassiter, just one word. She knows nothing of this. I have never told her because I wished to spare her pain. Will you remember this?'

'Then why have you told me?' was on Sheila's lips, but it was never uttered, for at that moment Miss Gillian entered the room.

CHAPTER XXXVI

‘YOU MUST NOT LOSE YOUR CROWN’

Teach me that harder lesson—how to live,
To serve Thee in the darkest paths of life ;
Arm me for conflict now, fresh vigour give,
And make me more than conqueror in the strife.

ANON.

If there be no enemy, no fight ; if no fight, no victory ; if no victory, no crown.—SAVONAROLA.

To Sheila the next few minutes were utterly chaotic and confused.

She saw Miss Gillian stand with uplifted hands on the threshold.

‘Upon my word, good people,’ she exclaimed in a tone of decided disapproval, ‘if this is your notion of comfort, I can’t say I hold with it ! Here is darkness visible, and the fire a rubbish heap, and I afraid to move for fear of treading on Peter’s tail.’

‘Peter is all right, Aunt Gill,’ returned Luke quickly ; ‘and I let the fire die down because Miss Lassiter found the room so hot. But,’ again manipulating the poker, ‘I can easily throw a light on the subject.’

‘Better let me do it, Luke,’ observed Miss Gillian, groping her way cautiously towards him. ‘Sure, it is

myself that has the lucky hand with a fire.' But Sheila intercepted her.

'Let me go first,' she said, and her voice was still a little breathless. 'You have been so long, Miss Gillian, and it is getting late, and Ivor will be home. Indeed, indeed, you must not keep me.'

'I shall see you again before I go,' observed Luke quietly. If the room were so hot, it must have seemed strange to him that Sheila's hand was so cold. As Sheila closed the door behind her, she could hear Miss Gillian still wrangling with Luke in her droll way over the fire.

What would they both think of her for hurrying away in this unmannerly fashion? But another minute in that room would have suffocated her. The choking sensation in her throat alarmed her. She stood for a moment in the porch to recover herself. By and by the crisp cool air refreshed her, and she drew her breath more easily. She was alone in the soothing darkness, with only the glimmer of starlight overhead. No, she would not hurry. What did it matter if for once she kept them waiting—if for once she thought more of herself than them? This day was not like other days. Had she not just heard Luke Brett pronounce his own death-warrant: 'I mean, that my life will probably be a short one.' Those had been his very words, but the awful finality of his tone had left no room for doubt. And then again, with the dull passivity of a settled purpose: 'You know now why I have never married—why I do not think it right to marry; for how could I bring such certain trouble into a woman's life?'

Then why had he told her? Why had he given her this strong proof of his friendship and trust? Why had he, so strong and self-reliant, craved so for her

sympathy that he had laid this awful burden upon her? —when he knew—when he must know, the pain he was causing her. Was it possible that for once human weakness had overcome his stern resolution? And yet—and yet—— Sheila felt sorely perplexed.

If Miss Gillian had only remained away a few more minutes, that she could have put that question to him and received his answer! But would he have answered her?

'Then why have you told me?' Yes, surely that would have wrung the truth from him; for with the clear-sightedness of love Sheila felt that some esoteric meaning lay behind his words.

She knew him so well. All these years he had carried his burden so bravely that no one had guessed how heavily it had pressed on him. And it was no mere yearning for a woman's tenderness and pity that had prompted him to tell that story. How simply he had related it, in how few words, and yet five human beings had owed their lives to him. How heroic had been that last effort, when with failing strength he had brought poor Peterson to land.

'O Luke, my hero,' she whispered in the darkness, and her eyes were so dim with tears that she could hardly grope her way.

That some strange bond of sympathy united them had long been evident to Sheila. But in her humility she failed to grasp the whole truth. Not even to herself did she dare whisper that her affection was returned and that Luke Brett loved her. That he cared for her, that he trusted her so absolutely as to repose this confidence in her—this indeed was a proud prerogative, which might surely content her.

'I must be patient,' she said to herself; 'perhaps

one day he may tell me his reasons.' And then, as the lights of The Moorings shone through the leafless trees, she resolutely crushed back the anguish that was overwhelming her. 'I must not think yet; the day's work is not over, and I cannot be alone.'

But with all Sheila's brave efforts to appear like herself, she saw Nell look at her curiously.

'You are so pale, Sheila, and your eyes are so bright. Are you sure you are well?'

'Oh yes, quite sure,' returned Sheila hastily. 'I am only a little tired. Well, Ivor, how are they getting on at Sydney Cottage?' And then both Ivor and Nell were launched on their favourite topic.

When supper was over, Sheila took up some knitting and Nell followed her example, and Ivor read items of interest from the paper. To an outsider it seemed quite a pleasant domestic picture that little fireside circle; but it was doubtful how much Sheila heard of the reading. Her hands moved mechanically. It was Nell who kept her blue eyes so intently on Ivor's face, who annotated every paragraph with childish interjections of surprise and appreciation.

Well, the evening was over at last. Nell had been routed up reluctantly from her warm corner, and had consented to betake herself to bed, and Ivor had gone off to the deserted kitchen for his nightly pipe, and Sheila was free to seek repose.

But there was little rest for her that night. All through those long dark hours she lay on an uneasy pillow, living through that strange talk in the gloaming, and trying to take up the burden of the future. 'My God, how am I to bear it!' she whispered once. 'How am I to live without him!' And she told herself despairingly that it was her death-warrant as well as

his—the death-warrant of her life's happiness, of the sweet secret hopes for which there had been no sure foundation, of all that calm content which had been hers since she and Ned had begun their life at The Moorings.

Sheila felt no secret envy of Ned's and Martha's happiness, she loved them both too well for that, but a deep sadness and terror of the future seized her. So little would have contented her. Just to know that Luke Brett was near, that at any time she might see him and hear his voice, that his advice and sympathy were always ready for her, that they should still be working side by side in God's world—yes, this—this would be happiness enough.

But what if he should leave her? What if one day they should come to her with pale, frightened faces, and tell her that the vicar was dead? How was she to carry her life's burden then?

'O Luke, my Luke, if I could only die instead of you!' she moaned. 'If the all-merciful Father would accept my sacrifice! But I am not worthy of such a privilege.' 'No man may deliver his brother: nor make agreement unto God for him,' said the Psalmist of old, and those words are profoundly true. For in one sense each soul must carry its own burden and life cross, and even the purest and most self-sacrificing love cannot pay the ransom or make the exchange; for poor suffering humanity has but one Redeemer—the Man of Sorrows, and acquainted with grief.'

It was Sheila's hour of weakness, and for a time she suffered intensely. The shock had been as terrible as it was unexpected; but she was far too healthy-minded and reasonable a woman to collapse utterly, her self-respect and sense of duty would prevent that.

If happiness were not for her—if it were ordained that she must walk in the dim underways of sorrow and under gray, moonless skies—was it not the Divine will? and should she refuse to take up her cross because it was so heavy? For what can be heavier to a woman than the cross of denied love?

What was it Luke Brett had said? ‘I am vowed to service’; and again, in those deep, vibrant tones that always thrilled her: ‘Until the call comes, I must do my half-day’s work.’ There was no flinching from the cross there.

‘O Luke, do not leave me yet—until I am stronger to bear it!’ was the secret cry of her heart. It was the admission of her woman’s weakness; but happily Sheila knew where to seek for strength, and after the storm and the stress of the conflict were over, and she was utterly spent and weary, came the refreshing balm of sleep.

It was in that darkest hour before dawn when she slept, and then a strange dream came to her. She thought she was walking through a desolate country, with wide spaces round her, and only arid rocks and dry watercourses, and a stony road that seemed to hurt her feet.

‘This must be the land of Negation,’ she said to herself; but she must have spoken aloud, for a voice answered her, and a gray-cloaked figure was at her side.

‘You are right,’ it returned gravely; ‘but you must not linger, for you have far to go.’

‘But I am tired,’ she pleaded, beginning to weep; ‘and I do not like this place: it is a waterless land, and silent and dreary, and the sun does not shine, and the solitude oppresses me.’

'There is no need for you to say that,' replied the voice; 'you are not alone. There are others on the path before and behind you; the brave hearts are in front, but there are feeble and timid ones behind.'

'I will wait for them—I am not brave.' But with a solemn gesture the cloaked figure drew her on.

'Courage, sister,' continued the voice, and somehow the tones seemed familiar to her; 'even in the wilderness of Negation there is hope. Plant your feet firmly and follow the beaten track; it is a winding road, and very narrow at times, but it leads to a fair haven of peace.'

'But I shall never reach it. I am not old, and I have a long life before me. Kind stranger, whoever you are, let me sit awhile by the wayside and weep.' But it seemed to her in this strange vision as though a shadowy hand held her up.

'Not so, dear heart, you must not lose your crown. Take up the burden you have dropped and journey on. Behind those gray hills the sun is shining, and when you gain the summit you will look down on the wondrous valley where tired pilgrims rest among the lilies and roses.'

'And then?'

'And then,' repeated the voice still more solemnly, 'there was evening and there was morning one day, for there is no night there.' And then the cloak dropped from the stranger's face, and she saw it was Luke Brètt; but the next moment she woke.

Sheila's brow was damp with moisture, and her heart was beating quickly. What was this dream? 'Not so, dear heart, you must not lose your crown.' And he had brought her this message. In that strange

borderland between waking and sleep she had met him again.

‘I must not lose my crown.’ How often through the days and weeks that followed Sheila said those words to herself, until they became a sort of charm or amulet to be worn next her heart. ‘He brought me the message,’ she would repeat again and again, ‘and I must never forget it.’

Luke Brett had told her that he would see her again before he left for St. Leonards. Sheila, however, had no intention of going to the vicarage unless he sent for her. But on Sunday evening, as she and Ivor were just leaving the church, the verger told her that Miss Lorimer wished to speak to her.

‘Very well,’ she returned. ‘You had better go on, Ivor, and tell Nell not to wait supper for me, in case I am detained’; for she had an instinctive feeling that Luke Brett had sent her a message.

She paced up and down under the elms until the church was empty. But it was some time before Miss Gillian joined her. ‘And sorry I am to keep you waiting, Sheila,’ she exclaimed; ‘but Mr. Ducie and I had some business to settle. He is coming in to supper directly. And what have you done with your brother? Luke wants you both to come in.’

‘Ivor was obliged to go home, Miss Gillian. Tommy and Bunnie are to sit up to supper to-night for a great treat, and it would not do to keep such small folk waiting, so I begged him to begin without me.’

‘That’s all right, then I can carry you off, my dear’—and Miss Gillian took her arm. ‘Isn’t that Mr. Ducie locking the vestry door? We will just wait for him and go in together.’

The Sunday suppers at the vicarage were always

sociable meals. The curate was always there, and often the churchwardens and organist or one or two of the choirmen, and a plentiful board was always spread. Miss Gillian delighted in a large-hearted hospitality, and her Sunday suppers were very popular in Uplands. This evening Sheila and Mr. Ducie were the only visitors.

Luke Brett came out of his study as they entered the house. He looked better, and his face had lost its worn look. He greeted Sheila with his usual cordiality. 'I am so glad you were able to come,' he said to her. 'I find I shall have to go on Tuesday, and I should have been sorry to leave without bidding you good-bye'; and Sheila made some monosyllabic reply. She could not feel at her ease with him; the recollection of their talk and her strange dream seemed to oppress her. But Luke Brett did not appear to notice her silence.

During supper-time he was unusually talkative, and he and Mr. Ducie argued on the subject of some book they were both reading. They would both have included Sheila in the discussion, but she confessed frankly that she had not yet read a page. 'I found it rather dry,' she owned honestly; 'only Ned in his last letter declared that both Martha and I must read it. Martha is half through it, I believe.'

'You will not find it dry after the first chapter or two, Miss Lassiter,' observed Mr. Ducie. 'It is the finest thing I have read for a long time.' And then the discussion waxed warm, and Sheila listened with downcast eyes, until Miss Gillian with an impatient movement rose from the table.

'They will be talking Christian socialism until midnight if we don't stop them, Sheila,' she said, with

her favourite little shrug. 'You shall come with me into the drawing-room, and we will talk of something more diverting.'

'But I must go, Miss Gillian. Are you aware that it is half-past nine?'

'I'll escort you, Miss Lassiter,' exclaimed Mr. Ducie, for he and Sheila were good friends. But before she could answer and decline this offer Mr. Brett struck in.

'Thanks, my dear fellow; I was just going to ask you to see Miss Lassiter home. Now, Aunt Gill, will you spare your visitor to me? I shall not detain you a moment'—as Sheila changed colour and hesitated. 'Will you come with me into the study, please?' And then without a word Sheila followed him.

The lamp was lighted and the room looked warm and comfortable. But Luke did not ask her to sit down; he remained standing by the table.

'I shall not see you for some time,' he said, in the quiet tone which Sheila knew often concealed deep feeling, 'and our conversation that night was broken off rather abruptly. It has struck me since that you must have thought me selfish.'

'I—oh no, Mr. Brett.'

'It was the pained look on your face that made me think so, and you told me, if you remember, that I had given you a shock. The words, or perhaps your manner in saying them, gave me the impression.'

Sheila grew rather pale, but she spoke in a guarded manner. 'I cannot deny that it was a shock, but most certainly I did not think you selfish. On the contrary'—trying to control her voice—'I understood that you were giving me a proof of real friendship; you knew well that I should respect your confidence.'

'Assuredly I knew that, and as far as I am concerned I do not repent my frankness. If I had other reasons'—he paused, and went on rather abruptly—'I have come to the conclusion that they are best unspoken. You can trust me?' But he looked at her a little wistfully, as though some doubt harassed him.

'I can, and I do trust you implicitly,' she returned, with some emotion. 'I would have told you that evening if I could—how grieved—how sorry——' but she could not go on. Then a peculiarly sweet smile came to Luke's face as he took her hand.

'Let that be unspoken too. Do I not know without words how your kind heart would feel for me? But, my dear friend, if you want to show your sympathy, if you want really to help me, let me feel that I have not made you sad. For to-night—forgive me if I say it—I missed the old brightness.'

Sheila's lip trembled a little. He was so dear to her—so perilously dear. Then she struggled for self-command.

'You must give me time to get over it. How could I help being sorry—for all our sakes—and you have done so much for me.'

'Have I? I am glad of that. But I trust I shall be spared to do much more for you and all my people. There, God bless you! I will take every care of myself. And there is one thing, here and there too, that we can do—we can pray for each other.' And then, with another strong pressure, he released her hand.

What were the words that haunted Sheila as she walked down the dark road beside Mr. Ducie? 'Not so, dear heart, you must not lose your crown. Take up the burden you have dropped and journey on.'

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE TWO CONSPIRATORS

In life troubles will come which seem as if they would never pass away. The night and the storm look as if they would last for ever, but the calm and the morning cannot be stayed ; the storm in its very nature is heavenly. The effort of nature, as that of the human heart, ever is to return to its repose, for God is peace.—GEORGE MACDONALD.

PERHAPS it was as well that an unexpected domestic incident occupied Sheila during the next week or two. Tommy took a severe chill, and for some days they were somewhat anxious about him, the little fellow was so delicate. Sheila devoted herself wholly to him. She slept in his room and did most of the day's nursing. Nell was willing to take her share, but she had little strength, and was sadly incompetent ; and Tommy, who was a tyrant in his baby way, refused to take his food or medicine from any one but Sheila. Ned made his nephew's illness an excuse for running down for a week-end, but his time was spent chiefly at the Old Cottage. He was not at all satisfied with Sheila's looks.'

'Don't let that little rascal wear you out,' he said rather seriously as he bade her good-bye. 'You don't look quite fit, She. There is Martha longing to help you, and you won't give her a chance'—rather reproachfully.

‘Dear Ned, I am really not so very tired, and Tommy is so good with me. You know I love nursing, and Martha has so much to do.’ For in three weeks’ time the sisters were to leave the Old Cottage and take up their quarters at the vicarage, while the bulk of the furniture was transferred to Sydney Cottage.

‘Well, remember good people are scarce, and we can’t spare you,’ returned Ned affectionately, as he took up his black bag. Martha had promised to walk with him to the station, but more than once Ned looked back to wave his hand to his sister.

Was it his fancy that Sheila did not look quite happy? Were those pale cheeks and dark lines under her eyes solely the result of disturbed nights and a wayward and autocratic Tommy. ‘She never spares herself,’ he thought, as he crossed Sandy Lane to the Cottage, where his lady-love was waiting for him in the porch; ‘but Martha and I will make her rest properly by and by.’ And during his journey to town Ned indulged in rosy-coloured dreams of the future—of the sweet home life that would be theirs, of honest toil and good work done, and peaceful evenings with his Martha beside him and Sheila’s bright face opposite to him. ‘No one shall ever quote that proverb to us, Martha,’ he had said to her as they stood together in the station, “two’s company and three’s none,” for it will not be true in our case.’

‘Dear Edward, of course not. I could not love Sheila better if she were my own sister, and it is sweet to know that the same roof will cover us. We will make her so happy.’ For Martha too was blissfully ignorant of Sheila’s plans, and neither of them dreamt of the mine that was being laid, and that Sheila would refuse to live at The Moorings had never entered their heads.

Sheila was well content to spend the greater part of her days in Tommy's room. It was less irksome to fight pitched battles with tin soldiers and to fire off miniature cannons than to sit with Nell over their needlework and to listen to her desultory and discursive talk. Sometimes Betty or Martha took her place, and then she would take long rapid walks over the golf-links ; but she never once went in the direction of the village or the vicarage. It was a relief to her to know that Miss Gillian would be away for a fortnight.

When Tommy was convalescent and needed her less, she found ample occupation at the Old Cottage ; and when Martha and Betty left their old home with many tears and settled in at the vicarage for a long visit under Miss Gillian's kindly wing, both she and Nell were busy enough.

How thankful Sheila was for that work no one but herself knew. She simply toiled from morning to night. Ivor remonstrated with her in vain.

'My dear Sheila, there is no need to work so hard,' he would say ; 'there are three weeks still before we clear out of The Moorings.' But Sheila only laughed at this remonstrance, and declared that she and Nell were having a good time.

Under Sheila's skilful supervision Sydney Cottage became not only habitable, but home-like and pretty, and Nell's blue eyes shone with joy and pride as she looked at the small cosy rooms, with their snow-white curtains and pretty flower-baskets. Even the garden had been redeemed from a wilderness by Ivor's exertions, and the borders were full of plants from the vicarage and The Moorings. Miss Gillian, with her usual helpfulness, had found a little maid for them—a

bright, capable girl that she had had in training under her own factotum Marshall.

‘Emma is a good girl, though a bit clumsy, Marshall says,’ observed Miss Gillian confidentially to Sheila. ‘But her mother has brought her up well, and she is as honest and steady as the day. And she is fond of children too, having brothers and sisters of her own.’

On the evening before ‘Tommy and Co.’ were to leave The Moorings, Ned paid them a surprise visit, and he and Sheila walked over to the cottage. Later on Ned was to go to the vicarage.

‘Of course you know Brett has come back?’ he observed, as they passed the turning that led to the vicarage.

‘Oh yes; I have heard from him once or twice,’ returned Sheila quietly; ‘and Miss Gillian sent me word by Betty. I am so sorry you have missed Betty, Ned, but she was obliged to go to Cottingdean a little earlier. I daresay Martha has told you that Miss Borton will not be ready for her for another ten days.’

Ned nodded. ‘Yes, I know. I shall be at the station to meet her. So Brett wrote to you, did he?’ and Ned looked a trifle curious. ‘I don’t believe, from his own account, that he is much better.’

‘Miss Gillian is a little disappointed certainly, but Dr. Moorhouse is away, so no one has heard his opinion. Mr. Brett himself wrote very cheerfully.’ And then they reached the cottage, and Ned’s attention was at once distracted. And Sheila received no grudging praise for the result of her labours in Ned’s absence. The mean-looking cottage had been transformed into a veritable bower.

Sheila had been greatly surprised when she had

received Luke Brett's first letter. It was quite simple and friendly, and told her just what she wanted to know. He seemed to take it as a matter of course that she should be interested in his doings. From beginning to end there was not a line that she could not have read to Ned.

'As your brother and my Aunt Gillian are absent, I hope you will give me any Uplands news,' he finished. And Sheila had found no difficulty, and a good deal of pleasure, in complying with this request.

The second letter was more confidential. 'I have talked to Hawtrey,' he wrote, 'and he is giving the matter his full consideration. Something in his manner tells me that he has already thought of some suitable person, but he declares that he must keep dark until he has felt his way a little. I think it would be wise not to hurry him. Somehow Hawtrey always turns up trumps. I have made him understand exactly what is wanted, and you need not fear his making any mistake. Of course I will let you know if anything definite is evolved.' The rest of the letter was a pleasant commentary on the news furnished by her.

Once again Luke wrote to tell her that his friend was in correspondence with some person unknown, but that he had not yet taken him into confidence. 'I think it will be better to let the matter stand over until my return. I shall hope to be back next week. The rest has certainly benefited me, and I am able to extend my daily walks. In another ten days or so I trust that I shall be fit to resume work.'

Ned was evidently anxious to be off to the vicarage, but Sheila remained behind to put one or two finishing touches to Nell's room. She had just completed her task when she saw Luke Brett's tall figure at the gate.

Her sudden gladness at the sight seemed to blot out the remembrance of the long blank month, with its underlying sadness. He looked up and greeted her with one of those sudden vivid smiles that seemed to her like sunshine. Perhaps she was just a little slow in her movements, for as she went downstairs he was waiting for her in the little dark hall.

‘Your brother told me you were here,’ he said, as he shook hands with her. ‘He was evidently in a great hurry, so I would not detain him. He asked me to come in and see the house.’

‘Would you like to see it now?’ she asked a little shyly. And then she showed him all Ivor’s clever little contrivances.

‘He is so very clever with his hands,’ she said proudly. ‘He would have made a capital engineer. Ned is so different—I do not believe he could hammer in a nail properly.’

‘I think you have both done wonders with very simple materials,’ observed Luke; ‘that is where genius comes in. Now shall we sit down, for I have much to tell you.’ And Sheila at once led the way to the parlour.

The little passage had been too dark for her to see his face plainly, and an unwonted feeling of constraint had prevented her from questioning him about his health. But now, as he seated himself by the window, his appearance did not satisfy her. She was not sure that he had gained flesh, and there was still a trace of lassitude in his gait.

‘Are you sure that you ought to have come back so soon?’ were her first words.

Luke smiled. ‘Do you call it soon’—in a reproachful voice. ‘It has been a long month to me,

I assure you. I was getting so restless and homesick that Hawtrey advised me to go home.'

'You are better, of course,' she returned; 'you are bronzed from the air and sun, but you are not strong yet—I can see that plainly.'

'Oh, Rome was not built in a day,' he replied lightly, 'and I had a pretty bad bout. But we will not waste precious time by talking of my unworthy self. We have more interesting subjects to discuss.'

'My friend Hawtrey has hit on something likely to suit you, Miss Lassiter, though the situation will not be tenable for some months.' Then, as a shade crossed Sheila's face at these words, he continued anxiously, 'Surely a month or longer at The Moorings will not matter?'

'Perhaps I ought not to mind it,' she returned in a troubled voice; 'only when one has to do a painful thing it is better to get it over. Putting it off only makes it all the harder to go.'

Her lip trembled for a moment. That childlike confession, made so frankly, was very pathetic and touching to Luke.

'Will you let me tell you about it?' he went on gently. 'In some ways the position is an ideal one. An old college friend of Hawtrey's, the Rev. Stockton Phillips, has a country living in Devonshire. He is a wealthy man, an old bachelor and rather eccentric, a very good scholar and an excellent clergyman, though Hawtrey says he is a bit utopian and unpractical. The parish is large and straggling, and has been much neglected, and dissent has got the upper hand; and though Mr. Phillips has a good curate, things are in a sad state both in the village and at the rectory, and his friends have recommended him to secure the services

of some capable, sensible lady, who shall act as housekeeper at the rectory and also do parish work—get up mothers' meetings and other charitable organisations and help in visiting the sick. In fact, be the rector's and curate's right hand.'

'Would the housekeeper have a sitting-room of her own?' asked Sheila; for she felt such a position must have its drawbacks. Then Luke Brett looked somewhat amused.

'I quite understand your scruples, Miss Lassiter, and as Mr. Phillips is by no means old, though his habits of life are settled, I am not surprised that the arrangement seems a little doubtful. But the fact is the rector does not propose your residing under his roof; the bare idea of a lady housekeeper living at the rectory would frighten him out of his wits. There is a cottage attached to the schools, where he proposes you should live. Hawtrey says it is quite a decent little place, and can be made both pretty and habitable for a lady. It is almost at the rectory gates, and Mr. Phillips thinks there can be no difficulty in supervising the household and managing the accounts. He has been very much troubled with servants lately; they have cheated and robbed him shamelessly, and have made his and his old man-servant's life miserable. He has been ill lately with worry and overwork, and has been ordered abroad for some months, so the rectory is to be shut up; in fact, your services will not be required until the middle or end of September.'

'It sounds rather attractive,' returned Sheila. 'I like the idea of the cottage—one would be more independent.'

'You are not afraid of the loneliness? Hawtrey tells me that there are very few gentlefolk in the place,

and they may not trouble themselves to visit Mr. Phillips's housekeeper. I am afraid you will find yourself somewhat isolated.'

'I shall not mind that,' she replied quickly; 'I shall have plenty of work, and my poorer neighbours will furnish me with sufficient interest. I am disposed to try it, Mr. Brett.'

'I think myself you might do worse,' was his answer. 'Mr. Phillips is rich and is quite disposed to be liberal; you would live rent free, have a servant to wait on you, and a good salary; and as far as I can see, there are only two objections—he will work you hard, and Coombe-under-the-Hill is a far cry from The Moorings.' Was it Sheila's fancy, or did Luke suppress a sigh as he spoke?

'Hard work will not frighten me,' she returned, 'and the long distance will perhaps be as well. If I were nearer——' she checked herself and the colour rushed into her face. If she were nearer, within a reasonable distance, how would she be able to endure her exile? But she must not dwell on that.

'Will you let me know what steps I am to take?' she said, as she rose from her seat. 'Thank you so much for the trouble you have taken; I am so grateful to you and Mr. Hawtrey.'

'And you will not consult your brother?'

'Oh no, certainly not. By and by I shall tell him and Martha; but he is so happy, dear fellow, that I could not bear to damp him. Why do you look at me like that, Mr. Brett?' trying to smile; 'indeed it will be best for them and me too.' But he shook his head a little sadly.

'You are very brave,' was all he said, 'but I wish—I wish it could be otherwise.'

And then they went out together into the sunshine;

but the hearts of both were heavy with unspoken trouble, for it seemed a bitter thing to Luke Brett that he must live his life alone without this sweet woman beside him ; and as for Sheila, it was as though her own hand and her own will were closing the door of her paradise. At the crossways they parted with a silent handshake.

There was no need for her to do anything at present he had told her—by and by she could put herself into communication with the rector of Coombe-under-the-Hill—but as Sheila walked home in the spring sunshine she told herself that, as far as she herself was concerned, the matter was already settled.

Ned remained at the vicarage until late in the afternoon, and then he brought Martha back with him to spend the evening at The Moorings.

As Nell thought it her duty to be in a lugubrious mood, and to dissolve into tears if any one addressed her, Ned's cheerfulness was a decided relief to the family, and the evening passed off better than Sheila expected.

Ned, who had never outgrown his boyish love of surprises, had told no one but Martha that he intended remaining the whole of the next day at Uplands, and it was not until breakfast was half over the next morning that Sheila was aware of his intention.

'Are you taking a later train, Ned?' she asked innocently ; 'for I see your black bag is not in the hall.' Then Ned, who was carving the ham at that moment, laid down his knife and fork and looked her calmly in the face.

'My good girl,' he remarked drily, 'it does not require twenty-four hours to pack my bag, and that is the period of time I intend to spend at The Moorings.'

'Oh, Ned, how delightful !' But Sheila said no more

at that moment; only, as she rose to untie Tommy's bib, her hand rested for a moment on Ned's shoulder with a caressing gesture. She knew so well why he was staying, that she might not feel too lonely that first evening.

As soon as the early luncheon was over, Sheila drove over to Sydney Cottage with Nell and the children, and helped them to unpack and settle in, while Ned took Martha and Kaiser for a walk. He was to have tea at the vicarage and call for Sheila, and they were to spend the evening quietly together.

'It is just like old times, Ned,' she observed as they walked down Sandy Lane together. She had done a hard day's work, and felt weary and satisfied. They had left Nell standing at the little gate of Sydney Cottage with Ivor beside her, both of them looking so proud and happy. Nell had waved to them until they were out of sight. 'Dear old fellow, it was so good of you to stay with me this evening!' Then Ned gave a low chuckling laugh.

'I thought you would be pleased, She; and I have seen so little of you lately. Martha did not mind; she quite understood when I told her that I meant to devote the evening to you. We will have a fire up in the study, for the evenings are still a bit chilly, and have one of our old palavers'; and Ned kept his word.

The evening was a real refreshment to Sheila; they talked over the old days in Brook Street, and once Ned alluded drolly to his poor old coat.

'Distance lends enchantment to the view, does it not, She?—somehow the retrospect is not half bad.' But Ned was a little surprised by the sudden emotion on Sheila's face.

'Dear Ned, it was such a happy time. What did it

matter, struggle and poverty and foolish little limitations, when we had each other?'

'But we shall have each other always,' he returned smiling; 'the new record will beat the old, She.'

'Will it, Ned?' but Sheila's voice had a note of sadness in it. 'But anyhow I thank God for the old life and the old days, that were full of work and were yet so dear'—and as she spoke Sheila's eyes were full of tears.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

SUNSHINE AND SHADOW

Oh thou, the patient one,
Who putteth faith in Him and none beside,
Bear yet thy load ; under the setting sun
The glad tents gleam ; thou shalt be satisfied.

EDWIN ARNOLD, *Pearls of the Faith.*

THE two months that elapsed before Edward Lassiter's marriage were passed very quietly by Sheila. To all outward appearance she seemed tranquil and content. The solitude so feelingly lamented by Ned in his letters was in reality most soothing and healing in its effect on her. The absence of all domestic friction, the knowledge that Ivor and his little household were comfortably settled at a short distance from The Moorings, and that Nell's hourly demands on time and patience had no longer to be met with outward patience and secret revolt, at once calmed and braced her to new efforts. How she revelled in the quiet house and garden and in those long solitary walks over the moor ! Every three weeks Ned came down to spend a quiet home Sunday with her, and these were indeed golden days to Sheila, and dearly she prized them. She saw Luke Brett constantly. She met him frequently in the village on her way to and from Sydney Cottage, or when she accepted Miss

Gillian's invitations to the vicarage. But he never called at The Moorings, except for a moment, to leave a book he had promised to lend her, or to bring her some message. On such occasions he rarely came farther than the gate; but each time she saw him her heart sank afresh, for it was evident to her that he had not regained his old strength.

During these months Sheila quietly carried out her plans. She gave up her old room and moved into the large front attic. Ned had been much upset at first when he found it out, but she soon brought him round to her opinion; and after a time he owned that perhaps she was right.

'You were so fond of the room, She,' he said regretfully.

'I mean to be just as fond of my new one,' she returned brightly. 'It is really as nice as possible, now all my goods and chattels are arranged, and the view is just lovely.'

Sheila still thought it wiser not to take Ned into confidence about her future projects. She was in correspondence with the rector of Coombe-under-the-Hill, but on his side things were not finally settled—an unexpected hitch had occurred—and even Luke Brett agreed that it would be as well to defer her communications until after the home-coming.

It had been arranged that Sheila should spend the last few days before the wedding with Ned in Heathcote Street. Sheila much preferred this to accepting the Lockharts' hospitable invitation. Luke Brett, who had promised to perform the service, was to be their guest for a night, and Ivor would accompany him, and Betty would be with her sister.

Ned had very little time to give to his sister, but he

evidently liked to have her near him. And to Sheila those last days passed far too rapidly. There was much that she could do for him, and it was happiness to sit silently at her work while Ned copied out voluminous notes at his writing-table ; for up to the eve of the wedding-day he was hard at work, and then he and Sheila packed up books and papers for her to take back to The Moorings.

Never was there a quieter wedding, but to Sheila it seemed simply perfect. The long drive in the early morning, the cool freshness of the great green common, the little group gathered in the sacred building, the stillness, the tender solemnity of Luke Brett's voice as it echoed through the empty nave, seemed to appeal to her irresistibly. Never had Martha looked sweeter than she did that day as she took her place beside her lover. Her clear silvery tones never faltered as she plighted her troth. As for Ned, Sheila dared not look at him, but she knew that, in spite of his evident nervousness, never was there a prouder and happier bridegroom. Ned had waited long for his happiness, but it had come at last to him, and now he had his heart's desire.

Betty was the only one who shed a tear. Martha's emotion lay far too deep for that, and when the impulsive little creature clung to her in the vestry, it was Martha who soothed and comforted her.

'Dear Bee, darling Bee, do not cry so,' she whispered ; 'it will make Edward so uncomfortable.'

'I was thinking of father,' sobbed poor Betty ; 'and, Marty, I do so hate to say good-bye.' But Betty was soon induced to dry her tears.

'Have you spoken to my wife, She?' were Ned's first words as Sheila murmured her congratulations.

Martha's pale cheeks mantled with blushes as she heard him. It was good to see his look as Sheila embraced her new sister. And then it was Ivor's and Cousin Becky's turn.

Cousin Becky's tiny dining-room was full to overflowing that morning ; but she had done wonders, and a tempting breakfast had been provided. It was only a hurried meal, for the bridal pair were to leave by an early train.

'I am not going to say good-bye, She,' were Ned's parting words, as they all crowded into the little garden to see them off ; 'in three weeks' time you will be welcoming us at The Moorings.' And Sheila smiled and waved her hand.

Sheila had plenty of work before her that day. She had to go back to Heathcote Street with Ivor and finish packing up her own and Ned's things, and take them to Victoria, where Luke Brett would meet them, and they would all go down to Uplands together. Betty was to remain with Cousin Becky for another night, and then to return to Cottingdean. The mail had arrived, and a long letter from Charlie had somewhat revived her drooping spirits, and Sheila was able to leave her more comfortably.

Sheila was resolutely keeping thought at bay. That last dear look of Ned's had been almost too much for her, but only Luke Brett noticed how her lips had trembled as she turned away.

No, she must not give way. She had her work to do. Ivor helped her manfully, and they arrived in good time at Victoria, where they found Luke waiting for them on the platform. A glance at Sheila's weary face was sufficient for him.

'You have had a trying day,' he said to her as they

took their places, 'but your brother and I are going to leave you in peace.' And then he opened his paper, and Sheila thankfully nestled into her cosy corner and closed her aching eyes. It was a relief to be quiet and not expected to talk, and yet never for an instant was she unconscious of Luke's presence.

Yes, he was right, the day had tried her greatly. Until this moment she had not guessed how severe had been the tension. But now a feeling of loneliness and depression seemed to weigh her down. The lives of most women have these crucial days, when they and their dear ones come to the crossways of life and must needs take different paths. The old order changeth—there are new relationships, new adjustments of circumstance—and it needs a brave heart and an unselfish spirit to take up the scrip and staff again and journey on.

Sheila wondered vaguely if it had been a trying day to Luke Brett also, for it struck her once that he looked strangely worn and jaded, and there was a set, stern expression about the lips that she had never noticed before. Perhaps Sheila's glance was magnetic, for the next moment he raised his eyes from the paper.

'I fear you are not rested yet,' he said in a voice of concern, 'but we shall be at Uplands in a few minutes.' Then in a lower key, 'I do not like to think of your being alone this evening.'

'Indeed it will be best for me,' she returned hastily, but her eyes were full of tears. 'When one is tired out and stupid, it is such a relief to know that one need not make efforts. Hush,' as he was about to speak, 'please do not say any more to me just now, or Ivor will hear us, and I must—I must have this one evening to myself.' And Luke evidently understood

her, for during the drive home he did not once address her, and only a long pressure of her hand told her of his sympathy.

‘Give my love to dear Miss Gillian, and tell her that I will come and see her to-morrow,’ were her parting words to Luke, and he smiled and nodded.

This one evening, that was all Sheila asked—a few quiet hours during which she could indulge in sad retrospection, and shed a few bitter tears at the thought that the dear old days were gone never to return, and then she would take up her burden again.

Luke secretly wondered at her quiet cheerfulness the next day, but he would have marvelled still more if he could have read her thoughts.

‘If one is unhappy oneself, one has no right to trouble others,’ she had told herself that morning, ‘and I mean to be as cheerful as I can’; and Sheila certainly kept her word.

The three weeks passed tranquilly away, and then the evening arrived when Ned and Martha were expected home. Sheila was at the gate as they drove up from the village. Ned sprang from the carriage almost before it stopped and gave her a mighty hug.

‘Good old She, isn’t it jolly to see you again!’ he exclaimed delightedly. And then Martha’s arms were round her, and the next minute she was walking between them and holding a hand of each, and which of the three faces looked happiest it was impossible to say.

Martha gave her husband a shy sweet glance as she crossed the threshold, and in an instant he was beside her.

‘Welcome home, my darling,’ he whispered as he kissed her.

‘Isn’t it a dear home?’ she returned softly, as Ned

took her into the study and Sheila followed them. 'It is all so beautiful—better even than I remembered it.' But as they both laughed at this, Martha gave Sheila's hand a little squeeze. 'You have worked so hard, and it all looks so sweet, and—and—I have done nothing to deserve such happiness'; but Martha's look was very lovely as she said this.

Sheila's heart had a little song of thankfulness in it as she left them and went downstairs. There was no doubt of their happiness. How well Ned looked; he seemed to have grown years younger, and the rôle of a married man suited him down to the ground.

It was really like one of their old evenings. After supper they went out in the moonlight, first into the garden and then up Sandy Lane, until they reached their favourite seat on the links, and Ned smoked his pipe in great contentment with wife and sister beside him.

'I shall go and see Brett to-morrow morning while you and Martha finish unpacking,' he observed, and they had cheerfully assented to this.

'I told Nell that you and Martha would be glad to see them later,' observed Sheila; 'so she and Ivor will walk up after supper, just for a cup of coffee and a chat, but they will not stay long'; and Ned seemed to approve of this.

It was wonderful how soon the little household settled down at The Moorings. Sheila's tact and unselfishness and Martha's humility smoothed over all difficulties. Eppie was the chief stumbling-block. She could not be made to understand for a long time that she must take her orders from the new mistress. If Martha hesitated or seemed undecided over the *menu*, Eppie would say cheerfully, 'Don't you fash

yourself, ma'am ; we'll be asking Miss Sheila what Mr. Edward would be after fancying for his dinner—she knows all his likes and dislikes.' Eppie's manner was not the least aggressive ; on the contrary, she distinctly approved of Mrs. Edward as a well-intentioned, harmless young woman, who must be tolerated and humoured and made to know her position. 'I don't hold with two mistresses,' Eppie was once heard to say, 'but for the sake of peace I'm bound to put up with it, and certainly Mrs. Edward is a pleasant-spoken body, and it is easy to see that the master is just wrapped up in her' ; but Eppie's tone was a little patronising.

'It seems to work well,' observed Luke Brett one evening when he had been having supper at The Moorings, and they were all in the garden together. Ned and Martha were sauntering down the path towards the ivy pergola, for in those early days of their married life they were seldom apart, and he and Sheila were left alone for a few minutes. 'The three-fold cord seems a strong one,' he added thoughtfully.

'I try not to be in their way,' returned Sheila quietly, 'and they are so good to me. Martha is the dearest sister possible, and you are right, we are very happy together ; but, all the same, I must go.'

'I was afraid you would say so,' he replied. 'Well, I will not argue the point ; we know each other's opinion—no one has a right to interfere with other people's lives' ; and then somewhat abruptly Luke Brett changed the subject. Sheila was sorry, for she felt that in some way he disapproved of her plan, though he was reluctant to tell her so.

'He cannot judge,' Sheila said to herself later that night ; 'if he knew all—if he only guessed the truth, he

would tell me that I was right to go. But now he thinks I am only sacrificing myself unnecessarily, his manner showed me that. He would like me to remain quietly at The Moorings.' And Sheila felt a fresh pang as she thought how impossible it would be for her to live her present life.

Towards the end of July Betty paid them a flying visit, and the sisters were very happy together. The evening after Betty had left them, Ned went down to the vicarage for an hour. Martha had a headache and had gone to bed early. The day had been unusually sultry, and Sheila, who found the house oppressive, was glad to enjoy the evening coolness as she paced the garden paths or sat in her favourite seat overlooking the gate and Sandy Lane.

A soft honey-sweet breeze was blowing off the common. The milky-white nicotianas gleamed through the dusk, and the stillness was only broken by the harsh note of the nightjar, or the flutter of some restless bird on the wing. It was late, but Sheila was unwilling to go in until Ned returned. A report had reached her that morning that the vicar was not well, and she was anxious to know how he was. Ned seldom stayed as long as this, and it was with a sense of relief that she heard Kaiser's bark in the lane and went to the gate to meet them.

Ned seemed surprised to see her.

'Were you waiting for me, She?' he asked. 'Do you know it is half-past eleven, and time for all good little girls to be in bed?'

'But you see I am not good,' she said, taking his arm; 'and it was far too hot to go indoors, and it was so delicious out here. How is Mr. Brett, Ned?'

'Oh, he is very down, poor fellow,' and Ned's

tone was a little grave. 'I did not mean to have told you to-night, for I knew it would worry you; but Brett saw the specialist yesterday—he went up to town, you know.'

'Yes, I know — well?' Sheila's tone was a little sharp.

'It seems that he and Dr. Moorhouse agree in every way. They say that Brett will have to be extremely careful or he will be laid up again. He is to winter abroad, they both insist on that. He must find a *locum tenens* to do his work, and have absolute rest for at least six months. They wish him to leave by the end of October.'

'Will he go?' Sheila brought out the words with a sort of gasp.

'He must go,' returned Ned mournfully, 'unless he wishes to break down altogether. I had no idea until this evening how bad things were, She; it has given me quite a shock. It is such hard lines, for he does so hate giving up his work; but he knows it must be done. Somehow,' went on Ned rather sadly, 'one does not like to think of him going away alone like that.'

'Then Miss Gillian will not go with him?'

'No, certainly not; he would not wish it. She is getting old, you see, and she would be much better at home. "If I had only myself to consider," he said to me, "I would rather take the risk and remain—somehow one would prefer to die in harness—but I have my people to consider, so I must go." But if you had seen his face, She.' But there was no answer to this.

There was a moment's troubled silence, then Sheila said hurriedly that she was too tired to talk any more, and then she wished him good-night. What was there to say? He was going away, and she must go too.

To-morrow or the next day she would tell Ned and Martha that she intended to leave them. It was no use putting it off any longer. And then she lay open-eyed in the darkness, and prayed for herself and Luke Brett as only a woman's loving heart can pray.

'He will not lose his crown,' she said to herself, as the faint dawn came stealing into her room; 'and I must not lose mine—I must not lose mine.'

CHAPTER XXXIX

A CRUCIAL HOUR

Let me know you mine,
Prove you mine, write my name upon your brow,
Hold you and have you,—and then die away,
If God will, with completion in my soul !

BROWNING.

‘DEAR SHEILA, surely you are not going out this afternoon? Edward has just told me that he is certain that a storm is brewing, the sky looks so heavy over the links.’

Martha’s reverence for her husband would not permit of any familiar diminutive ; it was one of her old-fashioned tender ways that were so perfect in his eyes.

‘A storm?’ returned Sheila absently, as she glanced out of the window. ‘I daresay there may be one before night, but Johnson thinks it will not come yet. Don’t trouble, Martha, I shall not go far ; but I feel I must have a walk. Come, Kaiser.’ But it struck both of them that the dog seemed reluctant to move. Sheila called to him more than once before he rose with a protesting shake and followed her to the gate.

It was the afternoon after Ned’s visit to the vicarage. The electricity of the atmosphere, the close, sultry heat, and the long sleepless night had affected Sheila’s

nerves and made her unusually restless. She was in that mood when one needs open spaces, wide horizons, and above all, movement, and no fear of an impending storm would have kept her indoors.

As she moved quickly down the bracken path, her first conscious thought was a strange one. 'I wonder how one would bear trouble if one were helpless and bedridden,' she said to herself. 'If one's limbs could not move, there would be no getting away from oneself then; one would just have to lie and bear the intolerable pain. How little one thinks of that!' And there came to Sheila's memory, as she walked on, a visit she had paid long ago to a newly-made widow, who had for many years been bedridden with hip disease, and a remark made by the poor creature had long haunted her.

'If I could only get up for a bit, I could bear it better. If I could stand at my wash-tub like Betty Saunders, I should not feel so bad; but to lie here night and day like a log, and to miss him worse every hour—well, it is cruel hard, that is what it is, Miss Lassiter.' And Sheila felt that she was only speaking the truth. 'Cruel hard' indeed, and yet the long life trial had ended in victory!

It was evident that Kaiser was not enjoying the walk. Instead of gambolling before her and taking long rushes over the moor, or indulging in visionary hunts after rabbits, he walked on sedately beside his mistress with drooping tail and a manner so distinctly disapproving that at any other time Sheila would have noticed it; but for once she was too much wrapped up in her sad musings to heed her four-footed companion. She was thinking of her impending talk with Ned, and wondering how she was to find courage

to open the subject. She had already walked some distance, when a faint rumble of thunder roused her in earnest. She had gone farther than she had intended, and must at once retrace her steps or the storm would overtake her. But as she paused for a moment to observe the strange weird effect of the intense green of the meadows and the brown tints of the moor under the bank of heavy copper-coloured clouds, she was surprised to hear a delighted bark of recognition from Kaiser, and as she turned round hastily she saw Luke Brett coming towards her.

He was walking very slowly, and was carrying his felt hat in his hand as though the heat oppressed him, and his face was strangely pale.

Sheila was more shocked than pleased to see him—that he should have walked all this distance on such an afternoon—but he put up his hand to check her remonstrance.

‘I know I deserve a scolding,’ he observed, trying to smile, ‘but I could not help myself. Ducie was away for the day, and I had to come over to the Lodge to baptize a dying child.’

‘But you might have driven.’

‘I meant to do so, but there was no carriage in just then, and I dared not wait. I left word that it should be sent on after me, but it has never come. Now we must not lose time or that cloud will break and we shall be drenched. Just across that meadow there is a cattle-shed where we can find shelter, if we can only reach it in time.’

‘Let us go then.’ Sheila’s tone was urgent, but he shook his head.

‘I must not walk faster. Already I am much oppressed—a storm always upsets me. Will you go

on first, and I will follow?' But Sheila refused to do this. Not for worlds would she have left him in his present condition.

'No, we will keep together,' she returned quietly. 'Do not talk,' for she had noticed his breathlessness. 'Look what a little way we have to go. Oh, never mind the rain,' as a big thunder-drop fell on her face, and then another. 'Take my arm, it will help you'; but even then he had to stand still more than once to get his breath.

Those few minutes seemed an eternity to Sheila before they had reached the shelter. In another minute the floodgates of heaven were open and a perfect torrent of rain seemed to blot out the landscape, and a crash of thunder brought Kaiser crouching to their feet. But Sheila was too much absorbed to notice anything. Luke Brett had seated himself on a rubbish heap, and the look of suffering on his face frightened her.

'You are ill,' she exclaimed—'you are in pain!' But he could not speak. He pointed feebly to his breast, and she understood him. He had told her once that he always carried a remedy for these attacks. The next moment the little bottle was in her hand and she was holding it to his lips. Then she knelt on the rubbish heap beside him and drew his head to her shoulder with almost a motherly gesture, and she never once thought of herself at all.

'You will rest better so—do not try to speak or move.' And so great was his need, that he obeyed her like a child. He said afterwards that but for her he must have died. Sheila had a little folding fan in her pocket, a mere toy of a thing that Miss Gillian had given her, but she found it useful now; she only

stopped fanning him to wipe the moisture from his brow as he leant heavily against her. Then the spasm passed and the laboured breathing grew calmer ; by and by he recovered sufficiently to speak.

‘ I am better now ; it has passed for this time. But you ought not to be doing this for me, Sheila.’ Did he know that he was calling her by her name for the first time ?

‘ I would do more than this,’ she answered tenderly. Then he turned feebly, and his lips touched the hand nearest him.

‘ God bless you for your sweet compassion !’ he whispered, and then he gently freed himself. ‘ Yes, it has passed for this time. One day it will come again, and the pain will be worse, and that will be the end.’

‘ Don’t—I can’t bear it !’ Sheila never knew she had breathed the words aloud, but he heard her. The next moment he stretched out his hand to her.

‘ Sit down beside me ; the pain and oppression have quite gone, and I can talk now. Sheila, I never meant to tell you—I thought to have died with my secret still unspoken—but circumstances have been too much for me. Dear, I think I have loved you since the day we first met. Will it trouble you to know this ?’

‘ It makes me very happy,’ was the frank answer. Then Luke lifted the hand he still held again to his lips.

‘ I know you will tell me the truth,—you are the truest woman I have ever met, as well as the dearest. Sheila, I would rather die than hurt you in any way, but I feel I am wrong in telling you of my love.’

‘ Wrong ! How do you mean, Luke ? Surely you know that I care too ?’ But the pressure of her hand was a sufficient answer.

‘Until to-day I never dared to think so, though I knew how strong was the sympathy between us. But I was trying to shut my eyes. Sheila, if you really love me—and I feel you do—be merciful and do not tempt me in my weakness. You are the dearest thing in life to me—the one thing I covet—but I must not ask you to be my wife.’

No answer, only a bowed, pale face as Sheila sat silently beside him. It was as though he had put a chalice of pure joy to her lips and then dashed it aside before she had sipped the sweetness.

He looked at her, and then turned away with almost a groan. Physical pain was gone, but how keen was his mental agony! A quarter of an hour ago this loved woman had held him in her arms, his fainting head had rested against her breast, and she had ministered to him with a sweet unconsciousness that had seemed to him divine. Now his manhood and his strong nature were crying out for her with an intensity that wrung his very heart. But he would wrestle with this temptation.

‘You know the reason,’ he said presently. ‘I am a doomed man, and my life will be a short one—happiness is not for me. I must not marry—it would be wrong, selfish to bring certain sorrow into any woman’s life. I think I told you this before?’

‘Yes.’

‘It is a great temptation’—he paused and then hurried on—‘but I must not listen to it. I am going away; perhaps when I come back we may both have got more used to the parting,—you may have less need of me.’

Sheila made no answer to this. She had drawn away her hand and her palms were crushing each

other fiercely. O God, that at such a moment a woman should be compelled to be silent—that she was so tied and bound by the trammels of conventionality that she dare not utter the truth, and so work out her deliverance! He was going away alone, and leaving her to consume her own soul with anxiety and sorrow.

‘Dearest, why will you not speak to me?’ he said at last. But as she raised her head at this appeal and looked at him, a sudden light seemed to break on him.

‘You do not agree with me—you think I am making a mistake. Sheila, is it possible, do you mean that you would come too?’

‘Most certainly I would come if you needed me.’

‘You would consent to be my wife after all I have told you. My dear one, are you sure that you have fully understood me: life must always be so terribly uncertain—I may live for years, I may, God only knows, die to-morrow.’

‘I have quite realised it, Luke’—in a low trembling voice. ‘If I can only be with you and help and care for you until—until the end, the rest of my life will be more bearable. But to see you go away alone——’ but she could not finish her sentence. The next moment his arms were round her.

‘Then it shall be so, my beloved,’ he said solemnly—‘until death us do part’; and then they kissed each other.

There was little talk between them after that, for Sheila’s quick ears heard the sound of carriage wheels on the road, and as the worst of the storm was over, she ran down the meadow to signal to the driver to stop. He had been all the way to the Lodge to find

the vicar, and was now returning to Uplands. Luke was still feeble and walked with difficulty, but he assured Sheila that a night's rest would set him right. But she refused to leave him until he was safe in his study and under Miss Gillian's care. Then she consented to be driven home.

Martha was in the hall to welcome her.

'Dear Sheila, Edward and I have been so anxious!' she exclaimed. 'But you are not wet—surely I heard carriage wheels in the lane?'

'I drove home with Mr. Brett,' returned Sheila hurriedly. She was pale, Martha thought, and her eyes were strangely bright. 'He had to go to the Lodge to baptize a dying child. Is Ned in the study? I want to speak to him.'

'Yes, dear, I have been with him all this time; I am afraid I have hindered him dreadfully.'

'Will you let me be alone with him for a little?'—pleadingly—'there is something I want to tell him'; and as Martha assented, somewhat wondering at her manner, Sheila gave her a hasty kiss and went upstairs.

'Oh, there you are, She, safe and sound!' exclaimed Ned cheerfully. 'Martha has been in such a state about you, and I was a bit anxious myself. Holloa, my good girl, what on earth is the matter with you?' for at the sound of Ned's cheery voice Sheila had suddenly and unexpectedly broken down into a perfect passion of tears that it was impossible for her to control.

Ned looked frightened. He thought she was hysterical, and would have summoned Martha and Eppie; but Sheila, who guessed his intention, held him fast.

'Oh, Ned, please wait,' she gasped. 'I am not ill, but something has happened and I must tell you.' And

then she choked back her sobs and tried to speak coherently.

‘I did not mean to be so foolish, but I have gone through so much—so much. Ned, my dear brother, you must not tell me I am wrong, for I have made up my mind. Luke and I love each other, and I am going to marry him. I cannot let him go away alone—I must be near him and comfort him, for I know how he needs me, and—and—we belong to each other now.’

‘Good heavens, She!’ Ned’s face wore a troubled expression; he had never imagined such a thing could happen. Then he stroked the brown head that was resting against his arm with fingers that were not quite steady.

‘Dear,’ he said tenderly, ‘are you sure that you are wise in this? You have to consider yourself as well as him—you know, She, that you may not have him long.’

‘Yes, I know,’—Sheila’s voice was clear again, and there was a calm steadfast look in her swollen eyes that went to her brother’s heart,—‘but perhaps God will be good to us, and spare him to me a little—and I shall be near him when it comes. Ned, dear old Ned, you have never misunderstood me yet, and you never will, for your own heart will sympathise with me too truly. I shall be happier marrying Luke, if I knew that he could not live more than a month or two, for I should have the right to mourn him all my life.’

Ned’s answer to this was a silent one, but Sheila knew she was understood.

CHAPTER XL

EXTRACTS FROM A DIARY

Shalt thou not teach me in that calmer home
The wisdom that I learned so ill in this—
The wisdom which is love—till I become
Thy fit companion in that land of bliss?
WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT.

VILLA CHATAIGNE, MENTONE,
January 1, 1902.

IT was Luke who first gave me the idea of keeping a diary. One morning at breakfast I remarked to him that we had been married exactly two months, and he said half-jestingly, 'Is it really so long as that! How time flies when one is happy! If one could only keep the record of such golden days!' He smiled at me as he said this, but I think he was in earnest. What those two months have been to us! But I cannot write about that even here—there are some things too sacred for pen and ink. Luke's expression 'golden days' describes them exactly. Just now I was trying to recall the words of the aged Faust when he reaches the pinnacle of his life's work—'Oh stay, the moment is so fair!' when a sudden fragrance in the room made me turn round, and there was Luke with a bouquet of Neapolitan violets in his hand.

'A happy new year,' he said, laying them on the

table beside me—‘sweets to the sweet!’ And then he stooped over me and read what I had written, and I knew by the pressure of his hand on my shoulder that he was pleased. ‘You must have a motto for the new year, dearest,’ he said, and then I yielded him my place. This is what Luke wrote: ‘As thy days, so shall thy strength be’ (Deut. xxxiii. 25); and then he added a few words of Phillips Brooks: ‘Why cannot we, slipping our hand in His each day, walk trustingly over that day’s appointed path, thorny or flowery, crooked or straight, knowing that evening will bring us sleep, peace, and home!’

‘Oh, Luke, that is beautiful!’ and then I closed the book and we went out together in the sunshine.

THE VILLA MONTANA, *January 7.*

We have been busy the last few days settling into our new quarters, which we greatly prefer to our old ones. The villa is a little higher up, and from our windows we have a lovely view of the blue Mediterranean. The owner of the villa is an artist, and the rooms are very prettily decorated, as well as extremely comfortable—only the garden is neglected. There are hedges of fuchsia, and the loveliest flowers are blooming in the quaintly-shaped beds, but the paths are grass-grown and weedy, and in a few years the place will be a wilderness. But Luke and I love it. There is a rose pergola, and a terrace with stone vases full of scarlet geraniums, and a mutilated statue here and there. Psyche has lost her arm, and Apollo looks like a prize-fighter with his broken nose, and Niobe holds a decapitated infant in her arms; but the terrace itself is charming. There is a little stone alcove where we sit

on sunny mornings. How Luke rejoices in the sunshine; he calls it his 'sun bath,' and declares that it has given him fresh life. He looks so bright and well, and if he would only gain flesh—but we have both agreed to leave that subject alone. 'Sufficient for the day'—could there be any command more beneficent, more merciful to human weakness than that!

February 14.

Valentine's Day—but I never remembered it until Luke brought me a bunch of lovely roses from the market. I was writing my weekly letter to Ned—always a long one—but when I asked Luke if he had anything to add, he gave me a most impossible message. 'You can tell him, if you like, that I am making fresh discoveries about my wife every day, and that she is even better than I thought her, and that I am more in love with her than ever.' 'Luke, how can you be so absurd? You may write that for yourself.' But of course he would not dream of doing such a thing. So it shall go down here. 'More in love with her than ever!' Oh, my precious husband, what could I say on my side! Sometimes Luke's goodness, his patience, and submission to his limitations seem to awe and sadden me—but I will not dwell on that.

●
March 1.

We have had rather a trying day, but it is over now. Last Sunday Luke was asked to help the English chaplain here and to take part in two services. He actually preached in the morning; and the result was a sleepless night and a slight recurrence of pain. There is a good doctor here, and I induced Luke to consult him, but his opinion has depressed us both. He told Luke that he had evidently overstrained

himself and overtaxed his strength for years, and that six months' rest was not sufficient. 'Surely the specialist you went to in town advised a longer time than that?' and Luke was obliged to own that he had. 'Dr. Stanhope asked me if it were not possible to give up my living,' he returned, 'as he did not consider me fit for work; but when I was unwilling to do this, he strongly advised me to rest for two years. "It would give you a chance—I cannot say more than this—but preaching in your present condition is suicidal." I felt very unhappy when Luke told me all this, but I thought it better not to harass him with any more advice—he knew my anxiety without my telling him. It would be better for him to think it out quietly by himself and seek counsel where he always sought it, and later we could talk it over together. But oh, how restless and miserable I felt! I thought the afternoon would never end. We were to have tea in the studio; it was our favourite sitting-room. I had been busying myself arranging the flower vases, but all the time my heart felt heavy as lead. What would he decide to do? The six months would be up in April, and I knew he had only engaged the *locum tenens* until the middle of May; he was planning to go back to the vicarage at the end of April; Aunt Gillian was already making preparations. Her letters were full of the new papers and cretonne for the drawing-room and some of the upstairs rooms. Mr. Wyatt, who objected to the smell of paint, had taken a bedroom *pro tem* in the village. A sudden pang of home-sickness came over me as I sat down by the open window. I had so counted on going to my own dear home with him, and such a longing for Ned seized me that I could hardly keep back the tears. But if it were for my darling's good!

Well, after all, what did it matter if we were only together? And then I heard Luke's step outside and tried to compose myself. He looked just as usual as he came towards me. He took my face in his hands and kissed it two or three times.

'You have been very good and patient, dearest,' he said as he sat down beside me. 'My wife is a wise woman, and that is why I admire her so. But I am ready to talk now.'

'Really and truly, Luke?'

'Yes, truly, love. You have had a long solitary afternoon, and your dear eyes look heavy and tired'—and here he kissed them lightly. 'Well, I have written to the Bishop and also to Moorhouse, and I mean to abide by their answer.'

'Dear Luke, I hardly understand.' How could I unless I had seen those letters?

'I will make it clear to you. I have told the Bishop that I am unwilling to resign my living, but that with his permission I will act on my doctor's advice and take entire rest for another twelvemonth. Hush, not a word until you have heard me out. I will keep on Wyatt—he is a splendid worker and the people like him, and Aunt Gillian is full of his praises.

'Now for my programme. As Dr. Rawlings so strongly advises six weeks in Switzerland, I propose that we leave here early in May, and do not put in an appearance at Uplands until the end of June.'

'We are to go home then. Oh, Luke, how delightful!'

'Why, yes, of course. You foolish child'—for there were actually tears of joy in my eyes—'do you suppose I am going to keep you and Ned apart any longer? And then there is Aunt Gill crazy to see us both. Besides, Wyatt must have his holiday.'

‘But you will not work?’

‘No, I will promise you that. Perhaps I may take part in one service on Sunday, but I will be very careful. I am afraid, love, that our visit will be a short one—barely three months’—here Luke sighed—‘and then I shall get my marching orders again. What should you say to Algiers, Sheila—they rather recommend that?’ But my only answer was to clasp him round the neck.

‘Oh, Luke, you are so brave, and I have been so faithless and heavy-hearted—thinking how hard it was for you—and now you put me to shame. Why am I not worthier of you, when you set me such an example?’ But he silenced me tenderly.

‘You must not say such things, Sheila, for they are not true. Self-will dies hard. I must have been an unfaithful servant or my Master would not have refused my work. But perhaps it is not right to say this; it may be that this is my appointed cross—that the fields are white with harvest and that I may not take my place amongst the reapers. Some men work, but with others “their strength is to sit still”’—and there was a sad vibrating note in Luke’s voice as he said this that told me that the victory had not been an easy one.

March 15.

It is all settled, and we are to go back to dear Uplands at the end of June. The Bishop has written such a kind fatherly letter to Luke, and Dr. Moorhouse is quite jubilant over the prolonged holiday. Everything is so nicely arranged. Mr. Wyatt has promised to stay on, only he stipulates for two months’ holiday; and of course Mr. Ducie must have his. I tell Luke that nothing could be better, as we shall be alone with

dear Aunt Gillian until the end of August. Ned is so pleased about it all ; he says he is glad that Luke has made up his mind to follow the counsel of perfection. Ned's letter was delightful. He tells me that Ivor is working well and steadily, and is quite mastering the details of his business. Robert Crowe is so well satisfied that he has spoken to his cousin, and there is every probability that Ivor will get a better berth before long. Nell and the children were all well and happy.

I think Ned will be glad to have me near him in July. Aunt Gillian has given me a strong hint in her last letter. She says Martha is looking extremely delicate, but very happy. But I have kept this to myself. I wonder if Luke guesses the reason why I am so glad to be going home. 'Ned will be wanting you by that time,' he said once, and he smiled a little knowingly as he said it. Dear Martha and dear old Ned—somehow I could not help crying a little to think how happy they must be. Now Luke wants me to go out with him and I must not write any more.

March 18.

We had rather a sad talk last Sunday evening. We were sitting out on the terrace enjoying the sea-breezes. I had been reading to Luke—until he told me that my voice was tired and bade me put down the book—and then all at once he began talking of the future.

'Have you ever thought what you will do, darling, when I am no longer with you?' Luke often says this sort of thing, and I try not to let him see how such talk distresses me. He told me one day that it was a relief to him to speak, and that he thought that I should

be glad afterwards that we had had courage to face things together—and of course I know he is right. So I tried to answer his question. I told him that I never willingly thought of the future, and that it all looked dark and hazy, but that once, when I was in church, the idea came to me that, if no other duty presented itself, I should like to work in connection with the Haggerston Mission. 'It was only an idea, Luke,' I stammered.

'It was worthy of you, dearest. But I was going to ask you to undertake some work for me. Will you do it, Sheila?'

'For you—need you ask, Luke?'

'I was thinking of Aunt Gillian, love; she is growing old, and she will miss me sorely; since my mother died I have been like a son to her. Dear wife, may I leave her in your charge?' But I need not write down my answer here.

Luke was full of gratitude, but I think he was a little sorry about the Haggerston Mission.

'Aunt Gill would not be happy in London,' he said regretfully. 'She has lived in the country all her life, and she does so love her garden and poultry-yard.'

'We could stay at Uplands,' I returned; 'there are houses to be got there.' And then it came over me suddenly that under those circumstances I could never bear to leave it. The next minute I hid my face on his shoulder. I think he understood that I could bear no more, for he rested his cheek against my hair, and for a long time there was silence between us.

March 24.

Luke had such an odd dream last night, but he did not tell it me until this evening.

‘It was not a grand one like yours, Sheila,’ he observed—for I had told him my strange dream soon after our marriage—‘but it was very quaint and interesting.’ And then he repeated it.

‘I thought I had made a long pilgrimage, and that I had come to a lonely place, all rocks and defiles, and that in front there was a dark archway, and a great gate that was shut and barred, and beside it there were two angels talking together, but neither of them took any notice of me.’

“‘If they only knew how simple it is,” one was saying; “but it is the darkness that frightens them—some of them shake with fear when they first see the passage. But they little know how soon the light comes—it is just a step; and they are never alone—no, not for a moment.”

“‘If we could only tell them that,” replied the other, “there would be a perfect rush for the gate; but the Master knows that it would not be well for them to come until they are called. Sometimes, when they are young and weak and terribly frightened, I try to whisper to them that they need not fear. But they seldom hear me, and they think they are alone in the darkness—as though the Father would permit that!” And then they both laughed like a chime of silver bells.

“‘They are coming now—unbar the gate, Azrael.” And then in deep melodious voices they both chanted: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff comfort me.” Then I seemed to hear the tramp of a great army, and I awoke.’

‘Oh, Luke, how beautiful!’

“‘If they only knew how simple it is,”—Sheila, I can hear that angel’s voice now.’

March 29.

We have been sitting on the terrace again this evening, and Luke has been talking about the continuity of life.

‘If we could only grasp that,’ he said in a voice that thrilled me, ‘there would be no more broken hearts and hopeless lives.’

‘How do you mean, dearest?’

‘I mean that we should read the gospel of life more truly—but now our eyes are holden and we do not see—the grim adjuncts of death would be banished from our memory, and the worn-out body would be to us only like a cast-off garment that we need no longer.’

‘Oh, if one could feel that!’

‘We must grasp the continuity of life more firmly. Try to realise it, sweet wife, when I am no more beside you. Here my work has not been well done—I have been fettered with infirmity and human weakness—but up there the servants of the King “shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”’

‘I will try to remember, Luke.’

‘What if the light be invisible, it will surely be shining there; and, darling, I may be nearer to you than you think—but we may safely leave that.’

‘But you will love me still, Luke?’ Then a wonderful smile came to his face.

‘Continuity of life, continuity of love, that is my creed. Now, dearest, the dews are falling and we must go in.’

THE END

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